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RANCH ROMANCES

First March Number

Hate's Harvest

By HERBERT A. WOODBURY

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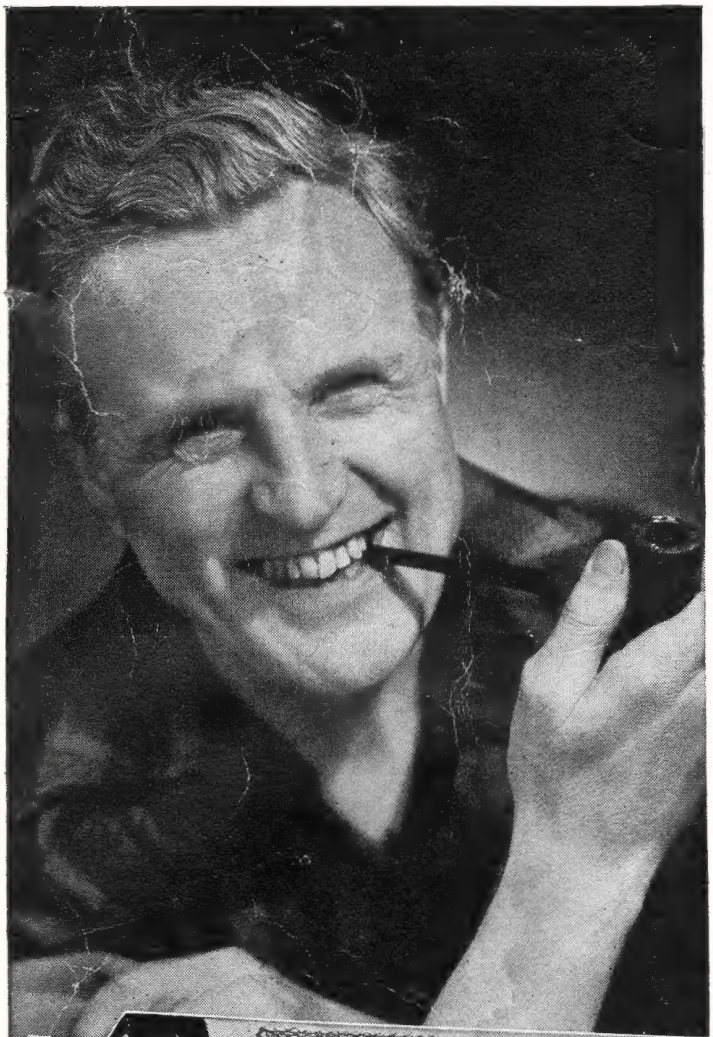
A *Beauty Bath for Teeth*

MEN WHO SMOKE A LOT WELCOME IT



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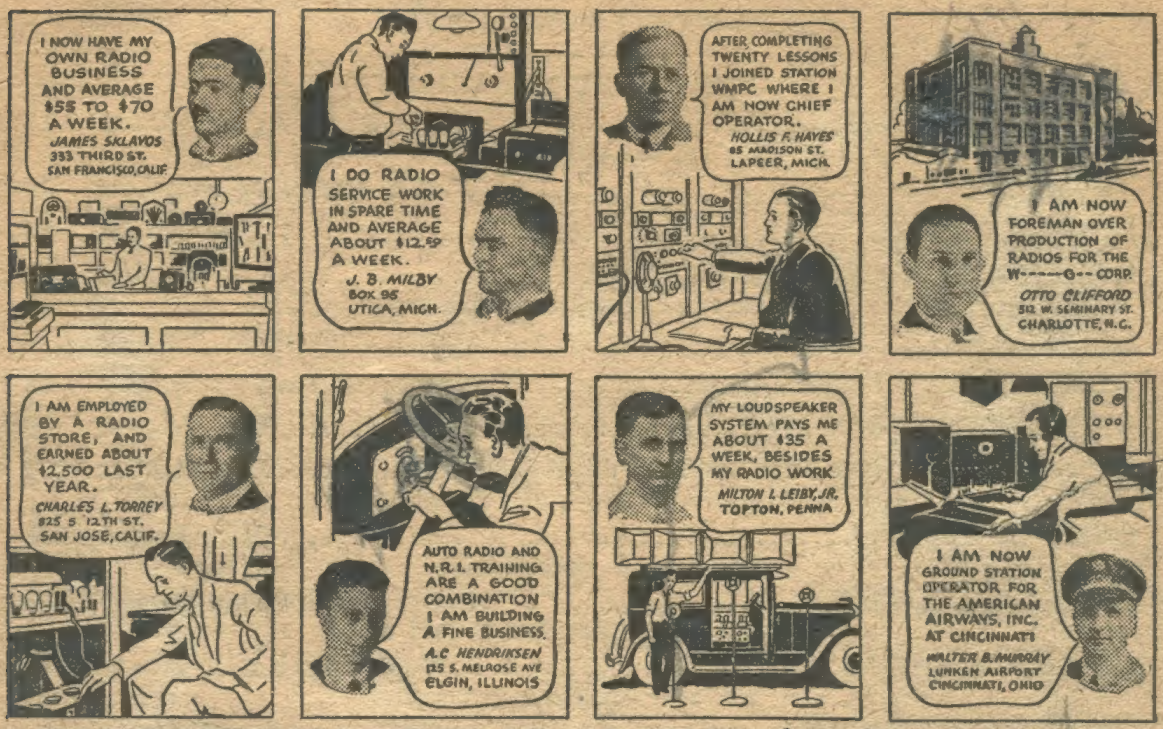
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Vol. LXXII

RANCH ROMANCES

No. 3

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FIRST MARCH NUMBER

HATE'S HARVEST.....Herbert A. Woodbury 13
A Complete Novel

CANYON GIRL.....Lulita Crawford Pritchett 59

COWGIRL REBEL.....Clee Woods 69

RANCH ROMANCES' AMATEUR PAGE.....The Readers 78
Where the Readers Do Their Stuff

LADY LAW.....C. Wiles Hallock 79

ALWAYS AND FOREVER.....L. Lindley Mulkey 89

FROM POINTS SOUTH.....Eric Howard 99

BEN THOMPSON'S FRENCH INTERLUDE.....Carl Pyne 108
About a Texas Fire-Eater

BUCK LUCK.....Elsa Barker 115
A Short Short Story

BUCKAROO'S WAY.....Robert Dale Denver 118
A Romantic Western Serial—Part Five

ROMANCE RANGE.....A. F. Hopkins and R. E. Hovey 133
A Western Story in Cartoons

OUT OF THE CHUTES.....Tex Sherman 134
The Rodeo Department

THE RODEO FANS' ASSOCIATION..... 136

TRAIL'S END ROLL CALL..... 137

OUR AIR MAIL.....The Readers 138
The Pen Pals' Pages

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE..... 142
A Try-Your-Skill Department

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?.....Professor Marcus Mari 143
The Horoscope Department

In the First April Number

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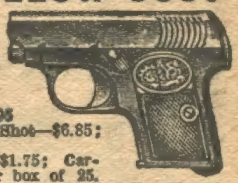

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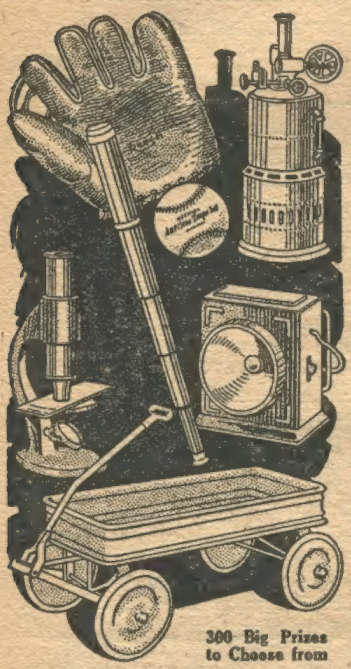

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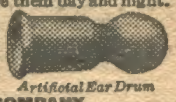

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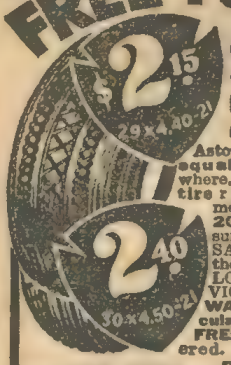

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30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
5.25-17	2.90	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
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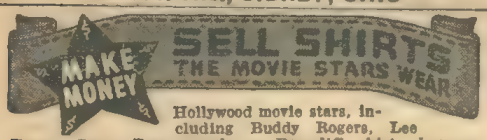

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Hate's Harvest

By Herbert A. Woodbury

Because Clay loved Nancy Dallas he had to believe in her, protect her, fight for her, whether she wanted him to or not.

CHAPTER I

Mark Pollinger

IN ONE respect only had the turbulent violence of those smoky years taken any physical toll of the man, Mark Pollinger. Mark rode, today, at fifty, as nimbly as he had ridden when, at twenty, he had first drifted in to the Blue Valley; first coveted the valley in its broad, far-flung entirety. He carried himself just as erectly, with broad shoulders unstooped by his sins. In any sort of rough and tumble struggle, he could still bite, and gouge, and crush, and maim with all his old, wolf-like savagery. But he wore glasses, today; thick-lensed prisms specially ground for him in Germany. Years and years before, in a battle to evict a squatter from his land, he had been struck a blow between the eyes with a gun butt. The long years since then had passed with only occasional headaches, until recently. These days, Mark Pollinger was almost blind.

Mark rode in to the Circle C about the middle of that June afternoon. Dismounting at the hitching-rail, leaving the reins of his pony dragging, he glanced about. The landscape blurred as always now; but he made out the indistinct fuzzy outline of someone working over a forge under a cottonwood tree. Mark advanced toward the blur; the blur turned and came toward Mark.

In a second Mark was able to see a young man; tall, tanned, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped. For an instant Mark felt a tiny twinge of—he didn't know quite what.

Not regret that he had arrived here as a messenger of unhappiness, cer-

tainly. For the day had long passed when Mark Pollinger had regretted anything. And not sadness or nostalgia, either, for they were the emotions of women, and he was a man, Mark Pollinger. Every inch a man, with nerves of iron and a heart of stone.

But still, Mark Pollinger never saw a young man in his smiling, eager, early twenties, without thinking briefly of the son he'd once longed to have. The son and the heir whom he never had had—nor, now, ever would have. . . . Something welled up in Mark for a second. Until he crushed it!

Forcing down whatever there might have been of softness left in him, Mark scowled at the blond, blue-eyed young man, and came abruptly to his point.

"Courtney," Mark said curtly, "you knew, I reckon, when I bought the Hughes place south of here this spring, that I'd be wantin' yours next. You've had time to make up your mind as to the lowest figure you'd accept. I'm offerin' you ten thousand dollars.

"It's goin' to be a dry summer again, this year. Last year, when your springs burnt out on you late in August, you pulled through with Russ Hughes's help. But Russ is gone now, and—"

The thin, straight line of the younger man's lips moved. Like Mark, he, too, had a cold calm in his manner and bearing. His cheek-bones were high; the lines of his bronzed face were sharp; his blue eyes were clear and level; and his voice was poised and self-contained, and low.

"Right, Mark," he said, "Russ Hughes is gone now. You stampeded half his herd last fall. You burned two of his stacks last winter. And, come early spring, he was sick of it; glad to sell out to you. And now if I don't accept this here offer o' your'n, I'm apt to wake up some mornin' and find—"

Mark Pollinger ignored the interruption; the accusation. "But Russ Hughes is gone," he said. "I own the Bar H. And I'm afraid I'm goin' to need all them Bar H water holes in Cottonwood Canyon for my own stock, this summer. You savvy?"

Mark added abruptly, "I'll give you one day to think it over if you like. Here's the contract. Take it in town to your lawyer. If you want to make a couple of minor changes in it—keep out a few head of pet stock; one, two of your saddle ponies—that'll be all right, but—"

Ashamed of himself suddenly, Mark broke off. His voice stiffened again. "But this here price only holds good twenty-four hours. If I have to make you a second offer, it'll be for less."

The young man stood there, still poised and self-contained.

Mark Pollinger turned bruskly away, walked back to his pony. He'd ridden thirty-odd miles to get here. He didn't need to ride the full thirty-odd again to sleep, that night, in a bed of his own. He could put up at the Hughes place or the Riordan place or at any one of the dozen other ranches which he owned between the Circle C and his original, first homestead, the Tin Cup. But he wouldn't. He'd ride the whole distance back to his main headquarters. His horse might play out, and he might have to change to another pony along the way. But he—Mark Pollinger—wouldn't tire. . . .

CHAPTER II

Clay Courtney

AFTER Mark had left him, Clay Courtney pointed his buckskin pony north through the live oak, the walnuts and the sycamores, mixed emotions filling him.

A year ago, he recalled, he had ridden through here at this time of year, his heart high; a sense of peacefulness filling him. The day had been cloudless, blue-skied, as today. The hills had been, as they were today, a riot of early June color; the oaks shiny, glossy green; the cottonwoods gray-barked and frail yellow leafed; the range floor

CLAY COURTNEY

a blue sea of wild iris and columbine and high grama grass. And the thought had come to him that, of all places in the world, this place, Blue Valley, was the most lovely.

Some of that Clay felt today. No man, he guessed, could ride through here and look off across the verdant valley lowlands to the bright hemming hills, and fail to respond a little. But worry furrowed Clay's tanned forehead beneath the rolled brim of his battered Stetson; thoughtfulness lay heavy upon his broad young shoulders; and a tenseness and grimness shone in the depths of his blue eyes.

This loveliness, he wondered. Was it worth fighting for?

A year ago only one answer would have occurred to Clay. An unequivocal yes! He'd been in love, then; been going to get married. And if Mark Pollinger, czar and potentate of the south end of the valley, had come to him, then, and said, "I'm offerin' you ten thousand dollars for your Circle C, Clay; and givin' you one day to make up your mind whether you'll sell," he'd have told old Mark, without even pausing to debate the matter, to go to hell. He'd have stayed. Fought, if he'd had to. He loved his ranch. Nancy Dallas loved it.

But all that, thought Clay, was an eternity ago. Nancy Dallas no longer loved the Circle C. Nancy Dallas no longer loved Clay Courtney and Clay Courtney no longer felt quite the same about his homestead. Jogging on into town, Clay felt his thoughts slip back twelve months. . . .

It had been June, as it was today. A wandering, itinerant tent show had hit the Post. Clay had gone to the show's first performance. And had sat there, squirming in misery, his heart going out in sympathy to the tall, slender young girl with the tawny blond hair and the wistfully serious brown eyes, who'd tried so hard that night to lift the tawdry variety show above the plane of the cheap and the banal.

She'd been good. Really good, poor kid. Only, ironically, by being good, she'd made the rest of the ham supporting cast seem even more inadept, if possible; even more awkward than it really was. Her artistry had served merely to bring the lack of artistry in the others into bolder relief. The mere handful there in the pitifully small audience that night had rocked with derisive laughter when it should have wept at some heavy emotional love scene; had sat stony silent when it should have laughed. A drunken Pollinger rider had tried to throw a cabbage; been knocked cold by a member of the orchestra.

There'd been a free-for-all, with the girl begging the battlers to stop slugging. She'd been swept, somehow, into the center of the struggling throng. Clay Courtney, wading in, fists flying, had saved her from being knocked down; trampled.

It had begun like that. Skip some of it. Clay himself, today, tried not to torture himself by remembering too much. Simply suffice it to say that it had been love at first sight on Clay's part. He'd been out here in the Blue Valley a year, then. He'd met girls like Sven Anderson's big, raw-boned daughters; and the cheap, painted kind who stepped up to him in the saloons. He hadn't seen a girl like Nancy Dallas

since he'd said good-by to his mother and sisters in Texas. A sort of homesickness had rolled up in him. A homesickness which wasn't really homesickness at all. He hadn't wanted to go back. With his father retired and living in town; and the old home ranch sold. He'd wanted to stay out here. But it had come to him abruptly that his life out here lacked a softness and a sweetness and a gentleness. He was lonely. . . .

The girl, Nancy Dallas, had been lonely, too. Her mother, her father were dead. Her foster father, Dan Starr, she loved. But she'd hated trouping. She'd wanted a home and stability; the chance, as she'd put it to Clay, "To take root somewhere. I'm so sick, so terribly sick of traveling like this. . . ."

The bitter and the sweet both rolled up in Clay, today. He'd given Nancy Dallas her opportunity to cease traveling, to take root. In a dashing, whirlwind courtship of six days, he'd won the girl's promise to marry him. And then—

CLAY jogged on, that afternoon. In an hour he hit the Post. It had no other name, this little settlement here at the extreme north end of Blue Valley where the bright hills closed in in their V. Here, a man named Boardman, back in the days of the valley's first occupancy by the white man, had built a store to trade with trappers and Indians.

Later, the north end of the valley had filled up with small cow outfits. Folks from the south—burned, driven, or bought out by Mark Pollinger—had crowded up here. Other folks, like Clay, had come in independently, to nest, from as far away as Texas. Hence the Post had grown. Clay Courtney rode, that afternoon, into a metropolis of some hundred souls.

Ten ponies branded with Mark Pollinger's Tin Cup stood in front of the Great Western Saloon. Clay eyed them thoughtfully. Two years ago, when Clay had first come in here, you wouldn't have seen such a sight in the Post.

Mark Pollinger's northern boundary then had been a good twenty miles to the south of the Post, and Mark's riders had done their trading and their carousing in Gallup City, the valley's larger town at the south end. But Mark Pollinger, who had required twenty-five years to move half-way up the valley, had managed recently to come half of the remaining distance in twenty-four brief months. For two years, now, the flames of some obstinate settler's house or barn or stacks had red etched the valley sky at intervals of a week, a month. Today, those riders whom Mark had put on some of the most recently acquired additions to his domain were finding it a shorter and more convenient ride here to the Post for their supplies and recreation.

Thinking of Mark, who, that afternoon, had given him twenty-four hours to sell out or be driven out, Clay rode on past the hitching-rail in front of which Mark's ponies stood.

He came on up into the next block where a huge white canvas tent had been erected. He read the sign just as he had read it two days ago:

HERE FOR ONE WEEK ONLY

THE FIVE STARRS
PRESENTING
A REFINED PROGRAM OF
MUSIC DRAMA TERPSICHORE
ADM. $1.00 NITES AT 8.

Clay checked his pony. The bitter and the sweet again rolled up in him. They were back here in the Post, the Five Starrs, Nancy Dallas. They were back; and Clay, two days ago, had called on the girl. But nothing had changed. She'd faced him, pale, white, nervously tense, just as she'd faced him on that last day of the show's stay the year before. She'd repeated again the words which had broken their brief engagement. She'd said:

"I'm sorry, Clay. Terribly sorry if I've hurt you. But I'd hurt you more if I married you, not loving you. And

I—I don't love you, Clay. You swept me off my feet. I thought for the minute I'd be happy with you. But I came to my senses in time to save both of us. And a year hasn't changed my mind. I'm surer now than I was even then, that I did the right thing, breaking it off."

He'd pleaded with her, as he'd pleaded with her the year before: "But why, Nancy? What made you change your mind about me?"

She'd answered him with the same stubborn, quiet firmness: "Does a person have to have reasons for everything he does? There aren't reasons, it seems to me, for lots of things. Lots of things just are. And that's the way I feel about you, Clay. I can't put my finger on any one thing. I can't say, I don't like the way you part your hair, or the color of your shirt, or— It's—I just don't love you. And if you don't want to annoy me, you'll have to accept it that way. This is good-by, Clay. Please, if you do love me, don't try to see me again. Ever."

Clay sat his saddle there for a second, staring at the tent. The urge swept over him to dismount, to walk around the side of the tent to the parked wagons in the rear where the troupe lived. To persist to Nancy again: "But why? There must be some reason." But after a moment Clay spurred on past. There were limits, he guessed, beyond which a man couldn't persist. They'd been close, he and Nancy, if only for a week. Better not to spoil the memories of that week. Better not to pursue the girl to the point where she finally whirled on him in anger.

Clay rode a half block on up the street, dismounted in front of the Beehive. He slipped his pony's bridle, tied the animal, and started across the plank sidewalk. Then a voice hailed him, "Clay—"

Clay turned. The girl was gone, now, from his thoughts. For there, coming toward him, was Ben Tyler, his neighbor to the north and east. And, accompanying Ben, was a man whom Clay loathed and detested. George Meyerson, the Post's busiest lawyer, neat and dapper and foppish still at fifty.

"Clay," said Ben, "you wasn't at the meetin', this afternoon."

Clay, with his eyes upon Meyerson, nodded. "Right, Ben."

And Ben Tyler asked him, "You was invited, wasn't you?"

"Sure," said Clay, "I was invited, only—"

"Only?"

Clay carefully weighed what he was about to say before he answered Ben. A couple of months before—when Mark Pollinger's ruthless advance up the valley had developed into a sheer rout of all the small ranchers to the north of the Tin Cup—Ben Tyler and some of Clay's other neighbors had formed a group which they'd called the North Valley Ranchers' Protective Association. They'd banded together to back up, in the future, any single member who might be ordered by Mark Pollinger to sell out. Clay had been invited to join. But Clay hadn't joined. And he said, now, to Ben Tyler:

"Only I ain't changed my mind, I'm afraid. You know how I feel, Ben. I'm old-fashioned, maybe. But I still can't git it out of my head that a man who rustles cattle's a cow thief."

Hot color surged instantly into Ben Tyler's face.

"Meanin'?"

"Nothin' personal, as I've told you before. You didn't set yourself up in business with a runnin' iron, Ben. But the same can't be said of some of the gang you've thrown in with."

"Too good for us, huh?" drawled Tyler. "Too pure and noble. It's wrong for some of them pore devils Mark Pollinger had evicted from their homes in the south end of the valley to've stole his cattle. But it ain't wrong, I reckon, for Mark to—"

"And then there's another reason," said Clay, with his eyes still upon the little lawyer, Meyerson. "I ain't ever mentioned it to you before, because I hate sayin' anything behind a man's

back that I ain't had the chance to say to his face. But Meyerson's here and I'll spill it. I don't quite trust the chief organizer of your association, Ben."

The little lawyer's both fists clenched. "Meanin' me?"

"I can't help rememberin'," Clay went on, "that there was a time not so very many years ago when George Meyerson was Mark Pollinger's right-hand man. Oh, I know all about how Mark's supposed to've got a grudge against Meyerson, and tried to frame him on embezzlin' charges, and how them charges didn't stand up in court.

"But supposin', Ben, that that there terrible row between Pollinger and Meyerson wasn't on the level. Supposin' the charges and the trial was a rigged affair, start to finish. Supposin' Meyerson, instead of hatin' his former boss like he claims today, was still secretly workin' for him. Eggin' you boys on to open war against Mark, so that Mark can come up here some day, with the law solidly behind him, and—"

Clay got no further.

The face of Ben Tyler's companion had distorted in pale livid fury. With a cry, "By Gawd, Courtney, you asked for it!" George Meyerson clawed for the heavy holster on his hip. The man cried, "So I'm a double-crossin' skunk that's still on Mark Pollinger's payroll, am I? Well, you're a—"

Clay's hand moved like lightning.

Afterward, Clay thought back to that moment. Meyerson had started to draw first. Clay, had he wished, could have shot the man down in self-defense. But Clay hadn't had either the intention or the desire, that afternoon, to kill George Meyerson. He'd been striving, simply, to see how the man would react to this direct accusation of being in league with Mark Pollinger. He'd been hoping to surprise a guilty start or a flush for Ben Tyler's benefit. For Clay liked Ben, and he saw Ben, these days, as the dupe of a crafty villain who'd taken him in and was going to sell him out. Now that he'd got his reaction from Meyerson—whatever it was worth—Clay was satisfied. He passed up the chance to kill the man.

Clay simply swept for his gun. Beating Meyerson to the draw, he covered the lawyer with his weapon; said:

"If the shoe don't fit, consider this an apology. But you know now, both of you, where I stand with the association."

Meyerson, his tensed fingers relaxing their grip upon the gun butt, glared back at Clay, foaming, fuming, furious, impotent. It was Ben Tyler, whom Clay liked, who spoke.

"And you know now, Courtney," Ben cried, "where the association stands with you! You're goin' to need water late this summer. Last year, you got it from Russ Hughes. But Russ is gone. Pollinger owns the Bar H. Pollinger ain't goin' to help you. And neither are we! Savvy?"

Clay stood there.

Tyler took Meyerson's arm. "Come on!"

Clay turned and watched the two of them walk bristlingly off down Main Street. For a moment, Clay wondered. Had he been a danged fool? If he did stay here and dig in and tangle with Mark Pollinger, he'd need help. Not Meyerson's help. No, and not the help of the wild bunch of young daredevils who'd turned recently to raiding Mark's herds. But he would need the help of the solid, substantial element like Ben Tyler. And now he'd got Ben down on him.

Shrugging after a second, saying, "The hell with it," Clay walked on across the plank sidewalk toward the door to which he'd originally started. He came up a flight of steps into a corridor of offices.

He halted before a portal marked:

JAMES RUTHERFORD
ATTORNEY-AT-LAW

George Meyerson wasn't the only lawyer in the Post. Meyerson had most of the business, now that he'd left Mark Pollinger and hung out his shingle here. But old Jim Rutherford

still, at the age of seventy-three, kept his office open. Clay preferred, when he needed advice, to go to old Jim.

THE inner door, separating Jim's waiting room from his private sanctum, was closed today. Voices came from the inner office—a girl's voice

MARK POLLINGER

talking low and earnestly; old Jim's voice answering, equally low. Clay sat down on a sofa.

He didn't try, of course, to hear what the two voices were saying. But, abruptly, the girl's voice rose a little:

"Then you won't—"

Old Jim's voice rose, too. "Can't, ma'am. What you're askin' me is most gosh-danged unethical."

The voices dropped again. The door of the inner office opened abruptly and the two of them—old Jim and the girl to whom he'd been talking—came out.

For the instant, Clay froze. His brief set-to with Tyler and Meyerson had jerked him out of his mood of being in the bitter-sweet past of a year ago. But now the calendar rolled back again. For there she stood. Nancy Dallas! Clay felt the roof of his mouth go dry.

Lovely, he'd said a thousand times, scarcely described the girl. It scarcely described her, now. Standing there, staring at her, Clay smelled lilacs on a May morning, back home in Texas; he seemed to hear the laughter of his mother's and his sisters' voices on a winter evening before the open fire in the cozy living-room. All his nostalgic homesickness of the year before rushed up in him again. All the pain and the ache which had filled him two days ago, when he'd stood thus, face to face with her, and heard her say: "This is good-by, Clay."

He saw the color sweep up into the girl's cheeks as her eyes met his. He saw her pull herself together, stiffen. He heard himself saying, "Howdy, Nancy." He heard her say, "Howdy, Clay." And then the moment in which their eyes had met was over. Rapidly pulling on her gloves, hurriedly turning her face the other way, Nancy Dallas darted out of old Jim's office. Clay, in a daze, turned and followed her with his eyes.

Old Jim's voice called him out of his reverie:

"You wanted to see me, boy?"

Clay didn't answer. His glance still followed the hurrying girl down the corridor. He heard her feet on the stairs, racing, as if she were fleeing in panic. He stood there wondering. And why should she flee from him? Was she afraid of him?

Clay heard again old Jim's voice: "You wanted to see me?"

He turned slowly back. He said, "Why, I reckon I did."

Listlessly, his hand went to his pocket. He took out the sales contract which Mark Pollinger had handed him a few hours before; handed it to old Jim.

"Glance through that, will you? Tell me whether it's all on the level and says what it seems to say, or whether there's some hidden joker in it."

There was a silence. Jim Rutherford read. Old Jim looked at Clay in surprise.

"You're sellin' out to Mark, are you, boy?"

"Did I say I was?"

"Well," said Jim, "this here is a sales contract between you and—"

"I ain't signed it yet," said Clay, "and maybe I won't. There's a queer streak of ornery, perverse cussedness in me, Jim. I hate bein' told I got to do something. Only problem now is which of two things I've got to do, I hate doin' the worst. If I don't sell—"

"You'll have to throw in with Meyerson and Tyler and—"

Clay made a wry face; nodded. "And if I do sell—Well, it'll be the first time in my life I ever give up without a fight. I dunno. It's complicated."

He let his voice trail; his mind again swept back to the girl who'd just fled from old Jim's office. He heard her saying to him, the year before, her white arms about his neck, her lips on his lips, "I love you, Clay. I love you so terribly." He asked himself for the millionth, futile time—what had changed her?

Then he heard Jim saying, "Well, old Mark ain't tryin' to put over a fast one on you, Clay. His price ain't what I'd call exactly generous, but he ain't cheatin' you out of anything else. The old robber's terms and conditions seems fair enough."

Jim handed Clay back the contract. The interview seemed to have come to an end. But Clay lingered there for a second.

"Jim," he demanded suddenly, impulsively, "what was it that girl that jest come out of here asked you to do for her, and that you said wasn't ethical."

He watched old Jim start as he used the word which had been used behind the closed office door. He plunged on before Jim could become angry with him for having eavesdropped. "I mean, is she in trouble of any sort, Jim? You see I—" As well as he could, he told old Jim how it was between himself and Nancy Dallas. He finished:

"She's never given me any explanations. But I've always figgered there must be some explanation. She couldn't have jest changed like that. Maybe she feels there's some reason why she mustn't marry me. And if she happened to mention anything to you that could be such a reason. . . . I reckon this ain't very ethical either, my puttin' you on the carpet. But I ain't askin' out of simple curiosity. It means a lot more'n that to me, Jim."

Clay's clear blue eyes held old Jim's. Old Jim smiled finally. "Well, I'm afraid I can't help you, boy," he said. "I can't point to anything that might be troublin' her and standin' in the way of her marryin' you. All I know is, she asked me—"

Jim broke off a second.

Clay prodded him, "Yeah, Jim?"

"Asked me," said Jim slowly, "what I though of a certain other lawyer, here. Wanted my opinion on his professional ability and ethics. And of course I couldn't give it to her, any more'n a doctor could give a patient his opinion of another doctor. Any more," said Jim, grinning slyly, "than I can even tell you the name of this other lawyer."

The sly grin left Jim's face. He said, "So there you are, Clay, for whatever it's worth to you. 'Tain't much, but if you feel it's a promisin' lead to anything, you're welcome to it, jest the same."

Clay stood there very still for a long moment after Jim had finished. What Jim had told him wasn't much. But he'd told Clay enough to let Clay guess the identity of the other lawyer about whom Nancy had questioned old Jim. Meyerson was the only other lawyer here!

Clay felt the prickles commence at the base of his spine. Nancy Dallas had been to Meyerson, had she? Shifty, tricky, treacherous little shyster that he was! Taken her troubles to Meyerson, and then got leery of the man, and come to Jim for advice?

Clay whirled on old Jim in anger. "And you didn't tell her Meyerson was a skunk? Good Lord, why?"

Old Jim regarded Clay for a long moment. "For the same reason," he

said finally, "that you're goin' to sell out to Mark Pollinger, boy. Because I don't aim—if I can help it—to git mixed up in other folks' messes. That answer your question?"

Clay winced.

It answered his question with a wallop, he guessed. Because he *was* going to sell out to Mark, wasn't he? It might rankle deep down inside him to think of being forced to sell out to Mark. But it was wiser to do that than to throw in with the North Valley Ranchers' Protective Association. And end up a convicted cattle thief, after George Meyerson had delivered the association, lock, stock and barrel, into the hands of the law.

Clay let his questions trail without final answers. He had twenty-four hours still in which to make up his mind about selling. Any final decision there could wait. But there was a decision about something else, which couldn't wait. Clay made it immediately.

He left Old Jim's office and started on down the street toward the Five Starrs' tent.

CHAPTER III

Ambuscade

CLAY turned into the tent's canvas foyer. Instantly, a voice boomed from the ticket booth:

"You, hombre! Not so fast, there, cowboy!"

Clay halted, whirled back. Stepping out of the ticket booth came a tall, rather handsome man in his late, well preserved forties. He wore a mustache and a Vandyke, a gorgeous flowered waistcoat, and a stiff-brimmed, military Stetson. Clay recognized him instantly. He was Dan Starr, the head of the troupe, Nancy's foster-father.

"You," said Dan Starr, advancing. "You wanted what?"

Clay smiled. "To see Nancy," he said.

The next was startling, somehow. Clay had gathered the year before that Dan Starr, moving in his glamorous world of the theater, had a rather low opinion of ranchers. Dan Starr had been far from cordial on the one occasion when Clay had talked to him. But still Clay wasn't prepared for the sudden belligerence in the man's manner.

Angry crimson swept up in Dan's face. The man's right hand plummeted to the butt end of the heavy revolver on his hip. The gun cleared the leather of its holster. The bore of the barrel pointed at Clay. Dan Starr cried, "And Nancy don't want to see you, jasper. Git me? She's told you, herself, ain't she?"

Clay blinked in the face of the drawn gun. "Why, sure," he stammered. "She's told me, only—"

"Then a word to the wise," said Dan Starr, "ought to be sufficient. Drift, partner!"

Clay tried to protest.

But the man Dan Starr wasn't in any mood, apparently, for argument. He'd had his orders from Nancy, apparently, to keep Clay from bothering her. And he was obeying those orders with the strictest of literalness. Dan Starr cocked his gun, lifted the hammer! His face purple in sudden fury, Dan roared:

"Vamose, partner! Git out and stay out! That's final! And if I catch you around here again, I'll—I'll— Savvy? This here gun's loaded, and I can use it!"

Clay didn't linger; argue further. Rage, wrath, fury, inexplicably bitter, clouded Dan Starr's face. Clay had the sudden impression of a man berserk, utterly beside himself. He realized that any argument was going to be futile. You couldn't reason with a mad man.

Pondering Dan Starr's fierce and so strangely bitter reaction, but not caring to get into a lead fight with the foster-father whom Nancy so dearly loved, Clay left the tent. But he didn't ride home.

He went on to the bank. He cashed a check for three hundred dollars. He drew out, in one lump sum, sufficient funds to pay his various petty debts around the valley in the event that he decided to sell out to Mark Pollinger and leave the district. He stayed in town for supper.

Toward nine that evening, watching from the Mansion House veranda, Clay saw Dan Starr come up the street and turn into the Great Western Saloon. Clay hurried back to the tent. The show was on, now, of course. Nancy was on the stage. Clay couldn't get to her, personally. He buttonholed an usher, a pale, pasty-faced kid in a red uniform too big for him; showed him five dollars.

"Do something for me, kid?"

The boy's eyes bulged. "Anything you say, partner."

Clay took a pencil and an envelope from his pocket. He wrote: "Dear Nancy: You've asked me, never to try to get in touch with you again. But—"

He lifted his pencil from the paper for a second. And just how should he express it, he wondered? He could put it down there in black and white, of course: "But this afternoon, I found out from Jim Rutherford that you wanted an opinion of George Meyerson. Look out for him, Nancy. . . ."

But he wanted to talk to her, too.

Clay stood there a second. Instead, he wrote: "But I've got to see you, this once more. Not to bother you, understand. Not to tell you that I love you, if you don't want to hear it. But to give you—" and he underlined it, "—some highly important information."

He lifted his pencil from the paper a second time; surveyed what he had written. He grinned sheepishly. It sounded rather melodramatic, maybe, putting it that way. But he deliberately didn't tone it down. Nope. "Highly important information," let it be. That phrase stood a better chance of getting an answer out of her than any other he could think of.

He signed the note; handed it and the five dollars to the usher. "Give it to Miss Dallas, the first chance you git," he ordered. "And if there's an answer, I'll be settin' on the Mansion House veranda waitin' for it."

Clay strolled back up the street. A couple of hours passed. He saw the throngs on down the street beginning to leave the tent. Five more minutes lagged by. The pale, pasty-faced usher at last came up the street again.

"It's O.K. with Miss Dallas, partner," the boy said. "Follow me."

So Clay followed him.

Afterward, Clay remembered that as he and the kid walked down Main Street toward the tent, the stars were shining. There was the scent of honeysuckle and rambler roses and new-cut hay from the valley lowlands in the soft breeze. He remembered the softness of the night, and the tingling sense of adventure which filled him. But he remembered, too, how briefly that mood had lasted. . . .

They were on their way around the side wall of the main tent, Clay and the usher, walking back toward the rear lot where the wagons were parked, when the usher said abruptly, "Watch your step there, partner." Only the warning came too late.

Too late, that is, to save Clay from tripping. Clay walked the wrong side of a tent stake; a guy rope caught him knee high; sent him pitching forward. As he went down the orange flashes blazed over him.

Too many to count. A cone of fire leaped from the black shadows not more than a dozen paces ahead. There was a *rat-tat-tat*. Ten shots in all, if the clip in the automatic had been full—so the Post's town marshal, Jud Tromp, said later. But Clay didn't know, then, how many shots there were.

All he knew was that he struck the earth hard, his chin ploughing into the ground. From beside him there came a gurgle and a rasp and a death rattle, as the pale, pasty kid in his red usher's

uniform tumbled into a limp and lifeless heap at his side!

The kid was dead! Clay knew that he was dead as he bounded in instinct to his own feet. He knew that there wasn't the slightest use in lingering to look after the kid's wounds, because the kid's body had been literally riddled. And so would his own body have been if he hadn't, providentially, tripped. With a leap, Clay was up, clawing for his own gun.

His gun cleared the leather of its holster. Simultaneously, something hit him. A flash of lightning detonated a charge of dynamite at the top of his skull. Clay felt the ground rise and tip under him; a sea of red whirled about him. The red changed to black. Darkness!

WHEN Clay opened his eyes, they had him on a horse blanket. A few paces off was the wall of the tent; he hadn't been moved from where he'd gone down. There were a couple of the show's roustabouts holding glaring gas lanterns. Crowded round Clay in a circle was a throng of curious. Jud Tromp, the Post's town marshal, was bending over him, forcing whiskey down his throat and spilling a lot more whiskey down his shirt front.

Groggily, dazedly, Clay sat up all the way. Somebody'd thrown a canvas tarpaulin over the poor pale kid. But there was a stain seeping through the dirty white. Clay felt sick at his stomach. Jud Tromp was asking him, "What happened?"

Clay found his voice. "Why, Jud," he said unsteadily, "I—" He offered the few meager details he was in any position to offer; how somebody from the inky shadows had opened fire without warning. There in the glare of the lanterns, he saw Nancy Dallas, tall and slender. She wasn't looking at him. She was with Dan Starr. Dan was saying to her, "No, Nancy, no. Don't look at the poor kid. I looked, and it's—"

And she was saying, "But I've got to look at him, Dad. Nobody's doing anything for him. You're sure he's really dead?" Her voice was choked, sobbing. "Dad," she demanded tremulously, "who—who'd have wanted to kill poor little Joe Stevens?"

Clay finished to Jud, "And then the minute I got to my feet, I was hit on my head by—"

"By this," said Jud, and showed Clay a tiny, flat little black automatic. It wasn't a Westerner's gun. Pea-shooter was the contemptuous name any Westerner would have given to the tiny-calibered little twenty-two. But it hadn't shot peas, thought Clay grimly. A man was dead! And only luck had saved Clay Courtney!

Jud's voice went on, "Killer emptied it, see. Thought when you fell that he'd got the both of you. Didn't save any bullets back. But you bounded to your feet, not dead, after all. He didn't have time to reload. He simply let fly at you with the empty gun. You say you couldn't describe him? You didn't see—"

NANCY DALLAS

"Nothin'," Clay confessed. "It all happened too quick."

Jud pondered in silence. A few paces away from him, Clay saw Nancy Dallas stooping and lifting the tarpaulin which covered the boy. He saw her

lay her hand tenderly upon the boy's forehead.

Then heard Jud's voice: "Tell me, Clay, what was you and Joe Stevens up to?"

Clay blinked. "Up to?"

"Yeah," said Jud, "what was the two of you doin' out here together to be shot at like that?"

Clay hesitated a second.

"Out with it," Jud commanded.

Still Clay hesitated a second. There was no real reason perhaps why he shouldn't give Jud all the facts. Except— He had a Texan's dislike, perhaps, of dragging a woman's name needlessly into a public discussion. What business was it of Jud's, or of any of the listeners', that he'd been on his way to have a talk with Nancy Dallas who'd loved him and then jilted him?

Clay said guardedly, giving Jud simply the gist of it, "Why, I had an appointment with one of the troupe, Jud. And Joe Stevens simply happened to be taking me back to—to him. No connection at all between me and Joe Stevens. You're workin' on the wrong angle there."

He paused a minute. His mind was clearing now. He was a little bit better able to think. "It might've been robbery," he said dubiously. "I cashed a fairly sizable check at the bank this afternoon. Somebody might've seen me, and been trailin' me, and layin' for me. Or else—"

"Or else?" Jud asked.

Clay got on up to his feet; stood there thoughtfully for a second. His mind swept back. He saw Mark Pollinger, czar of the lower valley, riding into his Circle C there at the beginning of the afternoon. He heard Mark saying to him, "Here's the contract. Take it in town to your lawyer. . . . But remember, cowboy! This here price only holds good twenty-four hours." Clay wondered for an instant. If this had happened after the twenty-four hours of grace which Mark had given him had fully elapsed, he'd have been certain that Mark had had him ambushed. Because he wouldn't, in that case, be the first obstinate settler whom the valley's czar had had drygulched.

Clay frowned, "Or it might have been a certain hombre I wouldn't quite feel justified yet in accusin'."

There was an instant stir there in the crowd as Clay spoke. Abruptly, Clay saw the little lawyer, George Meyerson, swagger forward, walk up to Jud.

"Jud," said Meyerson, smiling, "what Courtney's thinkin' is that I done it. Him and me had a run-in, this afternoon. He'll tell you I was ready to kill him." Meyerson drew himself up. "Well, I was. But I ain't now. I've been called worse names than Courtney called me and managed to live, unavenged. And now that I've had time to cool off, I reckon I can live unavenged this time.

"Besides which—" Meyerson patted the heavy holster on his hip. "When I go gunnin' for anybody, I'm in the habit of usin' this." The man drew his gun; handed it to Jud for examination, came on over to Clay.

"What about it, Clay?" he asked. "Really think I done it, do you?"

Clay stood there looking back at George Meyerson. And he wondered for a minute. Why had Meyerson been so quick to step forward and speak his piece, before Clay had even thought of him?

But after a second, Clay guessed that it hardly made much sense for the killer to have been Meyerson. Meyerson might have killed him in the heat of anger. But the little lawyer was scarcely the type to risk the consequences of cold-blooded murder for the mere empty, vainglorious satisfaction of his honor.

Clay shook his head. You couldn't even stretch a point and make it Meyerson, he was afraid. There was the connection — whatever it was — between Meyerson and Nancy Dallas. You could claim that Meyerson had been with the girl when she'd told the usher that she'd see Clay. And then pretend

preposterously that Meyerson had had Clay ambushed to prevent Clay's saying to Nancy, "Ma'am, Meyerson's a skunk." But it didn't make sense. Not only would such a murder have accomplished nothing; Nancy still could have heard Clay's opinion of Meyerson from plenty of other folks in the Post. But there was this additional reason against anything so cock-eyed. Only one person in the world even knew why Clay had wanted to see Nancy! And that person was Clay himself! He hadn't so much as mentioned Meyerson's name in his note!

Regretfully Clay dismissed Meyerson as a possibility; turned back to consider Mark Pollinger. It must have been Mark. Or could it have been— Into Clay's head for an instant popped the memory of Dan Starr ordering him: "Git out and stay out!" He turned bruskly from the idea; shudderingly away from it. No, not Dan Starr, either. Dan mightn't have wanted him to bother his foster-daughter, if the girl had left orders not to be bothered. But he certainly wouldn't have gone to the absurd lengths of shooting Clay.

Jud Tromp's voice called Clay out of his reverie. "Clay," Jud asked. "This here gal you had your date with. Tell me now. What was her name?"

Clay started. He hadn't mentioned having a date with a girl, had he? "Girl?" he stammered. "What makes you think—"

Jud glanced down at the tiny flat little automatic there in the palm of his hand. "Well," said Jud dryly, "it was a gal, wasn't it?"

And Clay, in a blinding flash, realized what Jud meant. The gun there! It wasn't just a weapon more Eastern than Western. It was more a woman's gun than a man's. The anger at Jud's stupidity welled up in Clay. Jud was going to have it next, he supposed, that Nancy had tried to kill him. Jud'd prove that he'd been pestering Nancy, annoying her. And he'd claim, idiotically, that the girl, to put an end to Clay's attentions, had shot him!

"Listen, now, Jud," Clay interposed.

But Jud wasn't listening. He'd turned to Dan Starr. Clay heard him asking, "Tell me, Mister. Any gal in your company with the initials, N. D.?" The next Clay never forgot. He heard Nancy Dallas answer before Dan Starr could speak, "N. D.? Why, those are my initials."

Jud's hand moved like lightning. Clay saw him shove the tiny, flat little automatic practically into the girl's face. Jud snapped, "Then this is your gun. Right?"

Dan Starr's voice mounted in a scream. "Don't answer him, Nancy! Don't answer him!"

Nancy Dallas, her eyes wide in astonishment, was already answering Jud, though. She was stammering, "I—I guess—I mean—" The poise returned to her. She drew herself up. "Yes, officer," she said, "that's my gun."

CHAPTER IV

Knight Errant

MIDNIGHT. Clay Courtney stood there, his head reeling, hearing Jud Tromp say to Nancy Dallas:

"And why would you have wanted to— Easy, ma'am. Easy. I come round this mornin' with a debt attachment to serve on the show. Your boss talked me into waitin' to serve it till tomorrow. Said maybe the receipts tonight would be big enough to pay up.

"But there wasn't twenty folks there in the tent tonight, and you seen the handwritin' on the wall. Tomorrow, you was goin' to be out of a job, broke, stranded. And when this hombre, whom you'd prob'ly seen cash his big check at the bank, asked to date you up, you seen the chance. Nothin' very remarkable about it. You wouldn't be the first little chippie that had come to the point where you was desperate enough to kill a man for his roll."

MIDNIGHT.

And there, south of the Post that night, in the black inky shadows of the hill-hemmed valley, the three men, Red Wade and Juan Lopez and Al Dixon, were reining their ponies to a halt at the drift fence gate which separated Clay Courtney's Circle C from the property which had once been Russ Hughes's Bar H; which was now a part of Mark Pollinger's mighty Tin Cup.

They were gun-fighters, Wade and Lopez; drifters from one range war to another; battle-scarred veterans, at thirty, of a dozen grim guerrilla campaigns, from Texas up across Kansas, into the sand hills and the valley of the Platte, on across Wyoming.

The kid, Al Dixon, was different. He wasn't in it for fun or for money. It was a holy war with him. He'd been fifteen when the sparks from the burning barn had fired the tiny cabin where his mother, three nights before, had brought into the world her baby daughter. Edith, they'd named the kid. . . . "Edith, Born December 15, Died December 20," they'd carved on the little headstone in boot hill, under the scrub pines, two days later. He'd seen his mother driven out into the winter night; he'd seen her lie for weeks in a coma, waking and crying at intervals for her baby. And some day he was going to kill Mark Pollinger. He'd taken a fierce and a solemn oath.

The kid swung down; opened the gate and left it open. He remounted and rode into Mark's kingdom on the heels of the others. They went on across the level valley and down into an arroyo, and then along the winding mud wash until it debouched into a grassy amphitheater with clay walls. Red Wade checked to a halt, and said, "Shush!" The three of them sat their ponies, still and silent, for an eternity.

It was dark down there. But if you peered into the shadows long enough and steadily enough, you could make out the hazy outlines of a bedded herd. Fifty cattle, maybe. They hadn't any business being down there. Come a sudden freshet, and they'd all be drowned before they could get out of the box. But there they were. Unattended. Red Wade, on a reconnoitering trip, had spotted 'em that afternoon. Strayed from the main herd, evidently. And whosever business it was to keep tabs on 'em, hadn't kept tabs on 'em. There they were, waiting to be taken by the three men, Red Wade, and Juan Lopez, and Al Dixon.

The kid, Al Dixon, chafed at the bit.

Red whispered, "Wait!" They waited a while longer. Half an hour, maybe. Then Red said, "Come on." They separated; Red and the kid to ease forward, close along one of the arroyo walls; Juan Lopez to creep up along the other wall. They'd meet again when they got round back of the herd.

But they didn't.

Five minutes passed. From the other side of the amphitheater—the side up which Juan had ridden—there came a flash, and then another flash of flame. And the cry, "Let 'em have it, boys! We got the sons o'—"

Red whirled his pony. The kid whirled his. The whole far wall was streaked with burnt-orange flashes. There wasn't anything they could have done for Juan. . . .

Spurring, trusting to the sounds of the fusillade to drown out the thud of their ponies' hoofs, Red and Al Dixon spurred. They hit the spot where they'd paused so long and waited, there at the mouth of the box. Then there was the cry behind them, "Come on, gang, there's some of 'em sneakin' away." But they had sufficient head start. They were up out of the arroyo at the first opportunity; off into the night.

"Trap," Red said.

The kid didn't bother to answer. It was so evident, of course, that it had been a trap. But he wondered abruptly whether the cattle had been left purposely unattended as bait.Or whether—

He asked Red suddenly, "Who else did you tell, Red, except us? I mean,

you don't think, do you, there was any chance of our bein' sold down the river by someone who—"

Red said, "Hell, no. Nobody'd be that low." And then: "I happened to mention it to Meyerson; that's all. But he certainly wouldn't have blabbed. Hell's bells, he warned me to look out for a trap. Said it seemed phony to him, so many cattle jest waitin' apparently to be stole so near Mark's north boundary."

"I see," said the kid.

BACK there in the Post, Jud Tromp's contemptuous, "You wouldn't be the first little chippie—" stung Clay with a lash from his daze of surprise about the gun. Couldn't Jud tell a chippie from a lady? Crying, "Listen here, now, Jud," Clay bounded forward.

So did Dan Starr. His face purple, Dan lifted a right uppercut from the very grass roots. Jud went reeling back. Dan reached for the gun with which he'd earlier threatened Clay. The gun leaped up.

Nancy whirled. With a cry of, "Dad, for God's sake!" she literally flung herself upon Dan Starr, pinioning both his arms, forcing the drawn gun down against her body.

A split second later, Meyerson had Dan Starr by one arm; Jud, back on his feet, had him by the other. And the girl was turning to Jud:

"You'll have to excuse my father," she said. "Maybe, if you've got a daughter of your own, you'll realize how he must have felt when you called me a—"

She broke off. Her eyes for the first time during the brief scene met Clay's. Then she looked back at Jud. "And now about me," she said. "That gun was—was—"

She was speaking very slowly; weighing, it came to Clay suddenly, every word she spoke. "That gun was stolen out of my dressing room, four days ago. So I couldn't possibly have used it tonight."

"And you didn't report it," Jud said.

"It didn't seem worth reporting."

Jud said dryly, "Solid gold heel plate here engraved, 'To N. D. on her eighteenth birthday. From Dad.' And it didn't seem worth reportin'! Supposin' we let that pass, though. Your hunch is—"

Clay watched her face suddenly

GEORGE MEYERSON

brighten. Her eyes again turned toward Clay; swept back to Jud. "Let's clear this part of it up, officer. In the first place, I didn't even receive Clay Courtney's note, tonight. His note wasn't even brought to me."

She was smiling now.

"So, I think," Nancy went on, "that the usher, Joe Stevens, must have looked at the note. And then gone to a confederate; the sneak thief who stole my gun four days ago. The two of them arranged to rob Mr. Courtney, only—"

Clay leaped forward excitedly. "Sure, Jud, see? Joe saw me cash my check at the bank. Him and his partner plotted to hold me up. Only Joe's partner double-crossed him. Rather than have to split whatever money they took from me, this other bird killed Joe at the same time he tried to kill me."

Clay looked at Nancy. He saw the radiance in her cheeks. She was smil-

ing at him as she'd used to smile at him, the year before. Gratitude overflowed her eyes. She said mutely with her glance, "Thanks."

Jud shook his head, though. "It don't jell, ma'am," Jud said quietly. His voice mounted. "You say you never received Mr. Courtney's note; that Joe never brought it round to you. And you claim that leaves you out of it. But if you never received Clay Courtney's note, then how in hades do you know he wrote you a note?"

There in the glare of the gas lanterns, Clay saw Nancy Dallas turn crimson. She stammered, "Why—why, didn't Clay just say that—"

Clay wished desperately that he had said it! But he hadn't. No, he'd been playing it so cagy; trying to keep her name out of it. He not only hadn't mentioned her name, but he hadn't mentioned any note!

Jud's voice cut in like a pistol shot. "Ma'am," said the town marshal, "Clay Courtney not only ain't told any of us that he sent a note back stage, but he ain't even, so far, said who it was his appointment was with. So when you try to claim his note never reached you, it means only one danged thing! You're lyin' like hell! The note did reach you! Otherwise you wouldn't have known there was a note! Or that you was the person to whom the note was addressed!"

Jud took a brusk step forward, caught the girl by the wrist. "Nancy Dallas," he said, "I arrest you for the murder of Joe Stevens!"

Clay watched the girl wilt. And Clay wilted, too. For Jud was right of course! Nancy might have guessed that Clay had been coming round the side of the tent to see her. But Nancy couldn't have known that the appointment had been made by means of a note unless, indeed, Joe had given her the note. She was, as Jud said, lying like hell!

Head whirling, Clay stood there for an instant, flat-footed. Simultaneously, a man's lunging body knocked him down. Dan Starr broke loose from Meyerson's restraining arm. He swept Clay to one side with his rush. He'd been disarmed after his first blaze-up. He hadn't a gun to draw on Jud. He simply hurled himself bodily into the Post's town marshal. Shouting, "Run for it, Nancy! Run for it!" he butted Jud Tromp in the stomach with his head, and both men crashed to the earth.

The two men rolled over as they struck the ground. One of the hombres who'd been standing there holding a lantern wasn't swift enough in dodging out of his way. Dan Starr and Jud Tromp, locked in each other's arms, clawing for each other's throats, rolled into the man with the lantern; bowled him over.

The lantern fell to the ground. Its flame guttered and all but went out. There was a flash and an explosion. Clay, just getting to his feet, flung his arm up in front of his face and staggered back. The next was sheer pandemonium. The pair of them, fighting there on the ground, received most of the blazing shower. Two agonized shrieks mingled. Both men leaped to their feet, clothes ablaze. Jud darted one way; Dan the other.

Somebody snatched up the tarpaulin which had been covering Joe Stevens, rushed at Jud, knocked him down, rolled him into the tarpaulin's folds. Clay swept up the horse blanket and dived after Dan Starr. As he dived, he saw the girl dart forward, too.

With a leap, holding the blanket like a cape, Clay managed to vault to Dan's shoulders, bear Dan to the earth. The flames died in a flash as Clay smothered them. But behind Clay there was a fresh shout. The blazing gasoline had fired the lot's matted grass. Those who'd set Jud down were picking him up still rolled in his tarpaulin, and rushing him to safety. Others were attempting to beat out the grass fire where it swept toward the canvas wall of the tent.

There at Clay's side, Nancy cried,

"Quick, give me a hand." The girl had bent over, and was struggling to lift Dan's heavy body. Clay, himself, stooped swiftly. The grass fire was spreading in this direction. He and Nancy were forced to do what the others were doing with Jud—carry the injured Dan Starr out of the path of the flames.

Those who were assisting Jud had rushed toward Main Street. But the spreading conflagration cut Clay and Nancy off from Main Street. They were compelled, perforce, to make their retreat in the opposite direction, toward the alley. And that was all that occurred to Clay just then—simply that he and Nancy were carrying the injured Dan Starr in the only direction in which they could carry him.

But as the two of them reached the alley with their burden, Nancy cried, "You stay here and guard him, Clay, while I—" Her words came tumbling out in a torrent. And Clay blinked! Escape? But why on earth should she want to rush back to the blazing lot and harness a pair of the show's horses to a wagon and escape?

Clay caught her wrist as she whirled away. "But Nancy!" he cried.

The girl turned back, swift and nimble. Her hand dropped down to Clay's hip; she plucked his gun from his holster, broke away and leaped back, covering Clay with his own weapon! She cried, "I thought you loved me, Clay. And were helping me. But if you're not willing to help me—"

Clay's head whirled. Love her, he did! Wasn't that why he'd made his attempt, tonight, to see her? But how would he be helping her, he asked himself, if he assisted her to flee from the Post? She was innocent of Joe's death! She had to be! Even Jud would see it after a brief explanation. Lies or no lies, Clay felt that he could convince Jud that the girl hadn't been simply tonight's attempted pick-up date. He could show Jud that he'd known the girl for a year; prove definitely to Jud that she wasn't any chippie.

Clay cried, "I am helpin' you, Nancy. I do love you, and you know it. But don't you realize, if you run away, it'll make it look to Jud as if you really are guilty? Listen to me, honey—"

She cut him off passionately. It didn't seem like her, somehow. To be so childishly panic-stricken. This wasn't the level-headed girl Clay had known the year before. She cried tremulously, "Please don't argue, Clay. Please! Just do what I say!"

There wasn't indeed, any time for arguing. Everything there on the lot around the tent was still confusion. But time was short. If Nancy Dallas really did prefer flight to remaining and facing the music, flight had to be seized by the forelock. Mixed and mingled emotions welled up in Clay. Anger, first. Anger at what he took for Nancy's unreasoning and unreasonable panic. Then suspicion, which he instantly fought down. Had she really had a hand in his ambush? Could she conceivably be guilty? Both the anger and the suspicion died. All Clay saw was a tall, slender young girl with tawny blond hair and agonized, pleading brown eyes.

Clay found his voice, no longer argumentative, soothing instead. It was wild, it was childish, it didn't make sense. But if flight was what she wanted, let it be that way. Clay smiled. "There wouldn't be time, honey," he said, "to harness a wagon. If you're sure you want to git out of here, let me— Look; you stay here with my gun. I'll light up the alley to Center Street. I'll find a rig of some sort, all harnessed and ready."

Gratitude again overflowed her eyes. Clay saw her for an instant, not as a frightened, unreasonable child, but as he'd seen her the year before when she'd said, "I love you, Clay." She seemed to say it again, "I love you. . . ." It was all the send-off Clay needed. He whirled, started up the alley, racing, his heart pumping.

In just a moment, he thought, he'd be sitting beside her in a racing buckboard. It'd be like old times. She'd tell him her story, whatever it was; the trouble which had sent her to George Meyerson; everything. She'd explain her lies to Jud. He'd be able, intelligently, from then on, to help her.

Leaving Nancy and Dan Starr behind him, Clay hit Center Street.

CHAPTER V

Nancy Dallas

BACK there in the alley, Nancy Dallas sat still and silent with her thoughts. Was she, she wondered, being an idiot to trust Clay? He'd allowed her to keep his gun, to be sure. That seemed to argue that he hadn't dashed up the alley to return with Jud or one of Jud's constables. He hadn't, in other words, yet guessed why she'd lied about receiving his note. But wouldn't he guess sooner or later? Wasn't he bound to guess? He already knew that Dan Starr wasn't her father; that her own father, John Dallas, gallant Texas sheriff, had died when she'd been six months old. . . .

Nancy's thoughts slipped back twelve months. A year ago, when the show had hit the Post, her mother, the first Nancy Dallas, had been dead for three years. And Dan Starr, for a little over a year, had been in love with Nancy, his foster-daughter. Nancy hadn't realized, twelve months ago when she'd met Clay, how insanely jealous of her Dan Starr was. She'd thought that Dan Starr would realize sooner or later that she couldn't ever love the man whom she called "Dad" in any other way except as a father. With no thought of consequences from Dan Starr, she'd started going places with Clay. . . .

She sat there at Dan Starr's side in the alleyway, very cold and still. She saw the expression on Dan Starr's face, a year ago, as she told him that she was going to marry Clay. Rage! Black fury! She heard Dan shouting, "If you do marry him, Nancy, I'll kill him. Understand? I ain't joking. I ain't makin' idle threats. If I can't have you, then no man living can have you!" She remembered how it had come to her in a wave of horror, that Dan wasn't joking or just making idle threats. He would kill Clay! Or force Clay, in a blazing gun battle, to kill him!

There'd been only one thing to do. For Clay's sake, and for Dan Starr's sake, she'd had to send Clay away, saying: "Reasons? Does a person have to have reasons for everything he does? I just don't love you, Clay. . . ."

And now?

It was Dan Starr, Nancy realized, who had killed Joe Stevens in his murderous attempt to kill Clay Courtney. No one else knew it yet. But Nancy knew it. She'd torn Clay's note into four pieces and tossed the pieces into the waste basket. Thinking that Dan wasn't around the show lot, she'd told Joe to bring Clay to her at the conclusion of the performance. This highly important information he had for her; what could it be? Something, perhaps, about those Texas oil lands of her real father, John Dallas? Clay had come from Texas, hadn't he? Maybe he knew about that oil tract.

But Dan, she saw now, hadn't been gone the whole evening. He'd seen her receive her note; maybe even seen Clay hand the note to Joe Stevens. He'd entered her dressing room while she'd been on the stage. He'd put the pieces of the note together. The "highly important information" Dan hadn't taken seriously. Dan had looked upon it simply as a ruse to secure a rendezvous. Maybe it had been just a ruse of Clay's to see her again, at that. Dan had instantly gone into his black rage of a year ago! He'd taken her gun from her dressing-room drawer. With no intention, of course, of leaving it at the scene of the ambush to draw suspicion upon her. With the idea simply of having a clean gun of his own to show

the authorities. Then Dan had gone out there and lain in wait for Clay! He'd done it! What he'd sworn a year ago to do. What he'd made all the more emphatic after Clay's brief call on her, two days ago, this year, when he'd said:

"And if I catch him even so much as sneakin' around here again, I'll shoot him! Remember that, Nancy!"

Violent and turbulent emotions filled Nancy Dallas, indeed, as she waited for Clay Courtney. Why, she asked herself in bitter reproach, had she consented to a rendezvous with Clay? Why had she ever faltered in the courage of her first adamant refusal ever to see him again? This information of his. . . . If he really did have any information for her, was it worth this?

Suppose it came to Clay, as it very well might, that Dan's interest in her was more than fatherly? Then Clay would realize why she'd lied about receiving his note. He'd realize she'd been trying to protect Dan. Clay would be human, she was afraid, if the light ever did dawn in him. He wouldn't be able to see why he should help Dan Starr. Or even see why she should feel it her duty to save Dan. He'd say:

"But the man's crime was cold-blooded and wanton. An hombre like that—so insanely jealous of you that he's ready to shoot anybody who pays you any attention—surely ain't got no claim on your loyalties."

And why was she standing by Dan?

An eternity seemed to pass, there in the darkness of the alleyway. Nancy Dallas sat with her thoughts, running the cool tips of her fingers up over Dan Starr's fevered forehead. The years slid back, and she could see Dan before this love of her had become an obsession with him.

He'd been different, then. They'd been at about the end of their rope, she and her mother, there in Fort Worth. Her mother'd lost her job waiting tables in the Palace Hotel, two weeks before. They hadn't eaten, either one of them, in four days. The rent was

DAN STARR

due. It had the trite cheapness of a trite melodrama if you wanted to look at it that way. But it hadn't been trite or cheap to either of them. They'd been hungry and practically on the street.

Her mother had gone out to look for work, and had fainted from exhaustion. Dan Starr had been driving by in his fancy, rubber-tired spring buggy. Dan, seeing the woman fall, had leaped out. Well, Dan's heart had gone out in pity to the poor widow and her orphan daughter. Dan, who ten years ago had been a dashing Romeo who could probably have had any woman between the Gulf and the Pacific, had fallen in love with her mother, and had swept aside all her mother's romantic scruples against never marrying again. Dan had rescued the pair of them from the gutter. That other Nancy Dallas had never, somehow, got over being grateful.

Nor had this Nancy. . . . Dan had made her poor lonely mother happy. Dan, in those years when the Five Starrs had been doing better business than the troupe was doing now, had lavished upon the pair of them every conceivable luxury. And so she was loyal, Nancy guessed. And maybe you ought to be loyal, too, to those big, grandiose abstractions with the capital

letters—those things like Right and Justice. But that wasn't the way she was, she was afraid. With her, it was a case of being loyal to people. The people you loved. And she loved Dan Starr. Not in the way in which he wanted her to love him. No, and not in a way, which now, after his cruel and brutal murder of Joe Stevens, would ever again have anything of respect about it. But still she loved him. Clay Courtney wouldn't see it. Nobody'd see it. But that was the way it was.

She heard hoofbeats suddenly. Clay Courtney had said that he'd return with a rig. But it sounded as if the man spurring down the alley were on horseback.

THERE wasn't a rig after all, that evening, on Center Street. Clay was compelled to race an additional half block, as far as the corner of Main. But the extra moments that he wasted in this way held their compensation. The burning grass fire had spread, in spite of the attempts of the crowd to prevent it, to the great canvas tent. The tent had gone up with a glare that lit the whole sky. The confusion at the spot where everything had started, far from petering out, was increasing. Folks would be milling round there, and nowhere else, for another hour. What difference did a moment or so make?

Clay rapped on the door of the Owl Pharmacy. The sleepy clerk in back got up from his cot and came forward, rubbing his eyes. Clay wasted a minute or two buying salve and gauze bandages. Because they'd need 'em for the girl's father's burns. Then Clay ran out and raced on round the corner into Main. And there was a piece of luck. Tied at the hitching-rail in front of the Great Western Saloon was Bill Cameron's buckboard. With the fastest pair of pure-bred Hambletonians in the county harnessed to it!

He untied Bill's team, vaulted to the buckboard box. His luck stayed with him. The ponies' owner, and everybody else who'd been there in the Great Western drinking, had left the saloon with the first outcries down the street; were at the fire. Nobody saw him. Clay wheeled the team, took the buckboard around the corner into Center, and around the second corner into the alley.

The two of them, the girl and her father, weren't where Clay had left them! . . . He drove on down to the alley's end; turned and came back. He cried in a stage whisper, first: "Nancy!" And then in a frenzied shout: "Where are you?"

They'd gone!

Clay tied his team to one of the iron rings on the rear loading platform of the Beehive. He got out, and he made the tour of the alley and the back yards leading off of it, on foot. A coldness, like the fog off Blue Creek on a November morning, rolled up in him. It meant only one thing, as Clay saw it. Jud! Jud, or someone deputized by Jud, had seen Clay fleeing with the pair of them. The man had followed and made his arrest!

Clay cut back in across the open lot toward the fire. The Post's glittering nickeled steamer, pumping water from Blue Creek, had things under control. The main tent had fallen in charred ruins, but the conflagration seemed unlikely to spread to the parked wagons or the canvas stables. Folks milled, surged around. Clay listened for gossip, but if there'd been an arrest made, nobody was talking about it. He came upon a blanket with somebody kneeling over it. The man kneeling was Doc Greer. The hombre on the blanket was Jud, his hands and face swathed in bandages.

Jud was crying, "But I tell you I got to—"

And the doc was saying, "You got to lie still, hombre. That's what you got to do. If they've escaped, there's only one place they could have lit out for. The rail-head at Gallup City. They ain't got no friends around here

to put 'em up. They'd hardly have gone north up Blue Canyon into the badlands. All you've got to do is git a telegram off any time before noon tomorrow, and you'll intercept 'em. But the chances is ten to one that they're still right here in the crowd, somewheres. Now, lie down, you wart, and let me . . . ."

Clay wandered back into the alley, and it made even less sense now than it had made before. Jud, apparently, only now had recovered consciousness. There'd been no search organized yet, and wouldn't be for some time.

Then the thing happened, as it were, right there before Clay's eyes! He'd left the team tied to the Beehive's rear loading platform. Now, as he stood there fifty or a hundred feet maybe from where he'd left Bill Cameron's Hambletonians, he suddenly saw someone untie the team! There was glare enough from the dying conflagration on the lot for him to make out a couple of shadowy figures in the buckboard's rear deck. One of the figures was a girl! The other—

But the tableau wasn't remaining static. As Clay stared, the hombre who'd been untying the ponies vaulted up over the front wheel to the box. The man cracked a whip. The buckboard was off as Clay leaped after it.

Belated understanding came to Clay!

Nancy Dallas's disappearance had been deliberate! The instant he'd left her, she had gone back to the show lot where,out of the troupe, no doubt, she'd corralled a new confederate. They'd dragged her father into one of those back yards which Clay was so certain he'd thoroughly searched; lain hidden. If Clay hadn't thoughtfully left a buckboard for them, they'd probably have gone out and got another rig somewhere else, when the coast was clear.

Clay came slowly to a halt. Now what? he asked himself. Giving him no more reasons for her conduct than she'd given him a year ago, Nancy had fled from him a second time. Was he a damned fool to persist beyond this point?

Clay stood there weak, limp, crushed, bewildered, utterly baffled. And then, into his head leaped the words which the Doc had just said to Jud: "If they've escaped all you've got to do is git a telegram off any time before tomorrow noon, and—"

It was true, what the Doc had said! Clay was the only person in the valley who might have put her up. She'd deliberately given Clay the slip, and now she'd be heading for Gallup City and the rail-head! No other way out of the valley in any other direction unless you took to saddle trails too narrow for a buckboard. Clay wondered abruptly! Did she know how easy it was going to be for Jud to intercept her with a telegram to the sheriff's office in Gallup City? Maybe she hadn't realized that there was a telegraph line between the Post, here, and Gallup City!

Clay started running again. As he hit the mouth of the alley, the buckboard, a whole half block away by now, was turning into Main Street at the spot where Main Street became the main valley highway south. Clay had to race the whole half block before he found a hitching-rail, and a pony.

It was hopeless, perhaps, trying to overtake Bill Cameron's pair of fleet, pure-blooded trotting ponies in the saddle of the mangy Mexican cayuse Clay found there at the corner. But Clay felt that he ought to try.

CHAPTER VI

Safe Harbor

THERE in Capitol Hill, two hundred miles to the east of Blue Valley, that night Sumner Carlisle, the governor of the State, sat up into the wee, small hours talking to his nephew, Phil Hodges. He said, "And so you can see that it's impossible to tell, reading the biased letters of this man Mark Pollinger on the one hand, and read-

ing the probably equally biased letters of Ben Tyler on the other hand, what's happening out there—whether there's an organized gang of rustlers harassing Pollinger; or whether the so-called rustlers are merely honest small ranchers defending their homesteads against a range hog.

"Phil, I want you to leave for the Blue Valley tomorrow morning. Find out what's really happening. Find out who's to blame for what. And report to me whether you think the local authorities can handle the situation, or whether you think I'd better declare martial law, and send in the militia."

MEANTIME, in Blue Valley Clay Courtney was spurring and quirting a none too fleet little red roan pony down the hard-pan of the valley highway which ran south to Gallup City. So few towns off the railroad out here had telegraphic communication with the outside world. She'd never guess she was heading for a trap!

The valley grass lands blurred past Clay. The valley widened. An occasional east-west cross road began to intersect the main road. But still Clay heard the rhythmic beat of Bill Cameron's Hambletonians keeping on, and on, due south.

In the sky to the east of him, above the high black peaks of one of the hemming ranges, came the grayness of the false dawn. Clay realized that he was commencing to lag. Wasn't he taking his life into his hands, anyway, come to think of it? He hadn't a gun, now, and the girl had. What if she mistook him, loping up behind her, for an enemy? Clay kept on.

Abruptly the faint far-off tattoo of the hoofbeats seemed to slacken. He commenced, for the first time, to gain. Yet, as he gained, the beat of hoofs died altogether. As if the team had halted. There on the highway, he roared past the entrance of Ben Tyler's lane just below his own little ranch. Then he heard the hoofbeats again. But not where he'd expected to hear them. They weren't ahead of him any longer. They were behind him, and off to one side. The team had turned into his neighbor's lane!

Clay checked his pony and whirled. But that was madder and wilder than their attempting to get to Gallup City! They didn't know Ben! Clay listened, and the ponies were no longer trotting; they were slowing to a walk. Stopping? At Ben's ranch house?

They hadn't stopped, it seemed. Clay came up the lane at a slow and cautious walk, himself. While he waited there, at the gate, listening for sounds from Ben's house, he heard the hoofbeats breaking into their trot again, away beyond Ben's house. The rig had simply come in here, and silently passed through the ranchyard. Now, safely through the far gate and out in open pasture country, the buckboard's driver had again whipped up his ponies. There in the false dawn's gray light, Clay silently skirted Ben's house and outbuildings. He paused and unlocked the far gate.

He'd lost whatever time he'd gained. When the dawn came finally, and he could use his eyes as well as his ears, he saw the buckboard, a tiny black speck off across the valley grass land, about a mile, perhaps, from the rising wall of black hills. They were going to try to get out of the valley that way? But they couldn't! Nobody who didn't know those hills could even take a saddle pony over them!

His own pony had long since played out. Clay couldn't get the beast to do any more than walk. But it didn't matter, he guessed. He watched the buckboard disappear into one of the black canyons which cut back, part way, into the hills. He knew now that he'd presently meet the buckboard coming back. Because those canyons were a snare and a delusion; you couldn't take a rig, or even a saddle pony, out the V end of any of them.

It took him another half-hour, maybe, to enter the canyon into which he'd have sworn the buckboard had gone.

Yet when Clay came to the point where the canyon approached its tip, he found it empty and his further progress blocked by a tumbled pile of boulders. The canyon behind the boulders was still wide enough, perhaps, to have allowed the buckboard to pass a little way farther. But, unless Bill Cameron's Hambletonians had wings—

Clay halted his pony and surveyed the enormity and the inescapable physical fact of the boulders. A second passed, maybe, while he stared, blinking. But no more than a second. A twig broke abruptly behind him. A voice lifted in command:

"Reach, partner!"

Clay jumped; started like a schoolboy in the dark! He'd been trailed out of town by the law? Nothing, abruptly, made sense. Except one thing. Except that a man's voice behind him was saying, "Reach, partner!" And except that he hadn't much choice about it. He hadn't a gun. He'd given his gun to Nancy Dallas. He couldn't defend himself; and he couldn't flee. Not through that rock wall!

Clay reached; lifted both hands above his head. Then, twisting his body slowly from the hips, he looked back. There wasn't just one guy. There were two. Clay recognized 'em. But they weren't, either one of 'em, the folks he'd expected to recognize. The red-headed hombre with his cocked gun wasn't from the show. Nor from Jud's office. Neither was his companion.

The redhead's name was Red Wade. He had an ugly lantern jaw and the white scar of an old bullet wound on his cheek. Clay'd seen him around town, two, three times recently; had sized him up as a hired gun fighter; had guessed that he was probably on one of the north valley rancher's payrolls. The other hombre Clay knew better. His name was Al Dixon.

Clay said, "Hi, kid."

The gun fighter, Wade, answered him. "Snoopin', huh?"

"Snoopin'?"

Red Ware bounded forward. "Git down, slow, off that hoss, Courtney," he commanded. Clay got down, and Red said, "I'm goin' to give you two seconds to say your piece. If you got a membership card to the association in your pocket, say so, and the kid'll frisk you for it, and we'll look at it. But if you ain't, I'm goin' to plug you, savvy?"

They faced each other from about a dozen paces, Red with his drawn gun, Clay with his hands above his head. Beside Red stood the kid, his knuckles white, his hand gripping the stock of his gun. There was plenty that Clay didn't understand. But enough that he did understand. Why had the trail he'd taken, following the girl, led him to a spot where Red Wade would sneak up from behind him? And what connection was there between the ingenue of the Five Starr traveling road company and the North Valley Ranchers' Protective Association? It didn't matter. . . . Clay had heard the sweep of the wings of Death's black angel once that evening. He heard them again. Luck wouldn't serve a man twice!

Clay found his voice. "Card's in my jumper pocket, Red. Ran into Ben Tyler in town, this afternoon. Joined up, finally."

"You search him," Red said.

Al Dixon walked forward, menacingly. His hand groped toward Clay.

An aeon spun itself out. There on the rock floor of the narrowed canyon, Clay saw the scrape of a steel-rimmed tire. Then the buckboard must have come this far!

Al Dixon's hand was coming out of Clay's pocket, now, with a sheaf of papers. There was a bill, there, for a new martingale from Schaeffer's. There was the last letter Clay had had from his mother down in Texas. And the contract Mark Pollinger had given him. And an empty tobacco package. But no membership card in the association, of course.

Clay poised himself.

THE other side of the seemingly impassable mass of boulders, the trim, dapper little lawyer, George Meyerson, was turning round on the seat of the buckboard, and saying to the girl who sat on the floor in the rear beside Dan Starr:

"Seems like black magic, don't it? And it danged near is. How them Indians, hundreds and hundreds of years before the invention of modern machinery, managed even to lift that rock into place, let alone balance it so perfectly on its pivot, is somethin' nobody's ever figgered out. Nobody prob'ly ever will figger it out, any more'n he'll figger out the pyramids of Egypt and Mexico. But there's your rock, swingin' jest the same. . . ."

Nancy Dallas didn't answer. Marvelous as the swinging rock had seemed to her, it seemed to her even more marvelous that she'd had the good fortune, there while she'd been waiting for Clay, to run into Meyerson. She wasn't afraid of the little lawyer, as she'd been half afraid of Clay.

Clay had been a dubious quantity. You couldn't predict which way he'd jump. But you could predict, to a mathematical certainty, the way the man Meyerson would jump.

The little lawyer had come to her, three days before; the second day of the show there in the Post. He'd known her father, John Dallas he'd said; and he'd told her his amazing story of having been in Texas, recently; having seen oil wells on the old Dallas property. Then he'd made her his proposition:

The show was broke, he knew. She didn't have the money to finance any sort of lawsuit. Such a suit mightn't even result in a victory; if her mother had let the apparently worthless land go for taxes (and her mother had, Nancy'd been obliged to confess) it might be impossible to reestablish an equity in the property for the girl. But still, Meyerson would like to undertake to collect what money he could for her. And if she'd just sign this contract he had here, why—

Only something—the sudden transparent cupidity in the man's eyes—had warned her. She hadn't been foolish enough to sign anything she hadn't read. She'd glanced through the contract and had found that, according to its terms, she'd be agreeing to pay Meyerson, as his fee, seventy-five per cent of whatever money he managed to get for her out of her father's estate. She'd demurred. He'd agreed to come down to fifty per cent, saying that such a figure was quite customary in such a case. But she'd still demurred, and had gone to Jim Rutherford, the Post's other lawyer, in the hope of finding out whether Meyerson's tactics were indeed customary, or whether they were those of a shyster. But as a result she felt she knew, to a nicety, how to handle Meyerson.

Those things like Right and Truth and Honor and Justice which might trouble a decent man like Clay Courtney, wouldn't ever, she was certain, trouble George Meyerson. Meyerson wouldn't mind saving the life of a guilty murderer. Meyerson wouldn't feel squeamish about the wantonness of Dan Starr's crime. Meyerson would do anything, if there was enough in it for him. Under the circumstances, she'd chosen Meyerson for her confederate, not Clay. Ironically, the man whom in most situations you'd instinctively mistrust, became, in this particular situation, the one man whom you could trust thoroughly!

Meyerson had come loping down the alley on his horse. He'd seen the two of them, herself and Clay Courtney, carrying Dan Starr off the lot, he'd said. He hadn't been able to dart through the flames and join them. So he'd borrowed a horse and circled the block. "And now, ma'am," he'd told her, "as your lawyer, I'm at your service."

What could have been more neat? She'd seen the chance to be rid of Clay Courtney. And she'd told herself—

and thoroughly believed it, because it was so, wasn't it?—that she was really doing Clay a favor. She wasn't just better protecting Dan, that way; but she was protecting Clay, too. Clay, whom she loved! What business had she mixing him up in a murder, anyway?

Remembering that light of cupidity in Meyerson's eyes; remembering how the lawyer had wanted to hog seventy-five per cent of whatever money he could collect from those oil lands of John Dallas, she'd put everything on that basis—money—as she'd breathlessly begged the man to see her and Dan Starr to safety.

She'd told him that she didn't want to stand trial. Never mind why. Let him guess, if he wanted to, that she didn't dare gamble for an acquittal. She'd said that she wanted to escape with Dan Starr. And she'd agreed, if the little lawyer would undertake such an escape, to sign the contract in regard to her father's estate. Sign it with the contingent fee reading seventy-five per cent. Would he get her safely out of this dreadful and apparently hopeless trouble on such a basis?

Would he?

Well, here they were, thought Nancy blissfully, going up a narrow rock corridor between high chimney walls. There behind them, a solid boulder had swung into its place in the tumbled pile of other boulders.

"You can hide out here," Meyerson was saying to her, "for a week, two weeks—a month, if you have to. Till the hue and cry dies down. Till Dan Starr's able to ride a hoss. Then I'll smuggle you outa the valley gosh-danged."

The narrow rock corridor widened at the end of a couple of hundred yards. The buckboard came out into a steeply hill-hemmed valley about three quarters of a mile long, and about a half mile wide. There was green grass. There were sycamore trees. There was a tiny cabin made of pine logs, and a spacious but empty pole corral. At the valley's far end a tiny stream started down from a cliff five, six hundred feet high, in a waterfall, and dissolved into milky spray and mist before it hit the valley floor. A feeling of security welled up in Nancy. What a safe asylum it was! And how lovely!

Meyerson brought the buckboard to a halt at the cabin stoop. Gently, he helped Nancy to lift down Dan Starr's blanket-wrapped body. They carried Dan between them into the cabin; laid him on a cot. Meyerson apologized for the condition of the room, strewed as it was with cigarette butts, pipe ashes, liquor bottles. He said, "The last gang that was up here, batchin' it, didn't keep things as clean as they might have, I'm afraid."

Then George Meyerson vanished into the adjoining lean-to, leaving Nancy with Dan.

In a moment he returned from the lean-to with a roll of gauze, a package of sterilized cotton, a spool of adhesive tape and a jar of unguent. They set to work, the two of them, removing the temporary, olive-oil soaked strips of cloth with which they'd bandaged Dan there in Meyerson's office, to which they'd fled through one of the alley back yards and where they'd waited while Clay had fruitlessly searched the alley.

Meyerson said, "Got all the supplies of a hospital here, savvy?" Nancy wondered why. But it didn't matter. It mattered, simply, that Dan was stirring and moaning deliriously, "—made a mistake, I reckon—shouldn't have—made that mistake."

Ten, fifteen minutes passed, perhaps, while they gingerly removed the first bandages; did as nearly a professional job as they could of replacing them with new. Ten, fifteen minutes.

Then, from outside, its echoes in the little hill-locked valley crashing and reverberating like thunder, came a shot! Nancy Dallas, and George Meyerson whirled, fear and surprise on their white faces.

CHAPTER VII

A Spy?

TINGLING, poised, Clay Courtney waited for the kid, Al Dixon, to make his inevitable discovery that there was no membership card to the North Valley Ranchers' Protective Association in his pocket. But Clay didn't wait for the kid to announce the discovery; Clay beat him to it, crying in feigned consternation, "Good Lord, you don't mean I've lost it."

He went on breathlessly, "But I had it. In that there pocket. Ben signed it, and— You can see I ain't lyin'. See that contract from Mark Pollinger? Mark come to me, yesterday afternoon, and give me twenty-four hours to git off my ranch, savvy? That forced me into the association. Hell's bells, you danged idiots, would I be up here in this canyon now, if I hadn't joined the association? Would I," he asked significantly, "even know that this here canyon with its—" He was guessing, now, but how else could it be—"with its swingin' rock existed?"

Clay let his voice trail. He could hear the kid coming to his defense, "That's right, Red. This is a contract signed by Mark Pollinger and unsigned by Courtney. Prob'ly he finally has joined up with us. Prob'ly he—"

The cocked gun didn't falter, there in the gunfighter's hand. "And there's a way of makin' surer than 'prob'ly'," said Red dryly. "We ain't goin' to turn him loose, are we, kid? If he knows about the swingin' rock, he knows too goldanged much, if, by any chance, he ain't one of us.

"You kid," Red barked, "swing the rock open. And you, Courtney, git back on your hoss, and ride in there ahead of me. Git me? This story o' yours'll stand a little checkin'. And while we check it, you ain't gittin' out of our sight. Savvy?"

Clay savvied abruptly—something that Red wasn't savvying. The girl and Dan Starr had passed through that opening now being revealed as the rock swung on its pivot! Red and the kid, returning to this hide-out, no doubt, from some foray into the night, didn't know it! But Clay knew it! And felt sudden panic assail him!

This new confederate of Nancy's. He'd had the right, had he, to pass through that portal? The man wasn't any longer a member of the theatrical troup as Clay had first assumed. He was a member of the North Valley Ranchers' Association? Suppose her confederate weren't a member? How were the pair of them, Red and Al, going to take to that discovery? Clay had saved his life for the time being, he saw. But had he, in doing so, jeopardized Nancy's?

Al Dixon rode ahead of Clay. The gunfighter, Wade, rode behind him. The rock corridor widened. They came out into the secret valley beyond.

There, drawn up in front of the cabin, were Bill Cameron's buckboard and Bill Cameron's two pure-blooded Hambletonians! The effect of the sight upon Red and Al was catastrophic! Bill wasn't a member of the association! Bill was a sporting gentleman who lived in town! To Clay it meant that the girl and her father and someone else—who else?—were in the cabin. To Red and Al it meant that Clay must indeed be a spy! Clay and Bill! Clay had stayed outside on the lookout, while Bill had gone in!

Red and Al jerked their ponies to a startled halt! Red cried, "One word o' warnin' out o' you, Courtney, to your partner, and, by Gawd, it'll be the last you'll utter." He cried in the same breath to the kid, "You keep him covered." As the kid's gun covered Clay, Red flung himself from his pony, and started to stalk forward silently, on foot!

The girl's confederate there in the cabin was Meyerson, of course. Meyerson was a member of the association in good standing. Red, sneaking up on the cabin, was going to find a friend,

not an enemy. But Clay didn't know that. Clay hadn't any idea whom Red would find. What if the girl's confederate hadn't, indeed, the right to be in that cabin?

There was only one thing to do, thought Clay. Nancy had his gun! Her confederate doubtless was armed, too. Warned, the pair of 'em had a fighting chance against Red Wade and the kid. Clay spurred his pony. He forced Al Dixon to blast at him. And the kid, maybe, wasn't as deadly a shot as the professional fighter, Wade; but Clay wasn't thinking that the breaks were in his favor. All he was thinking of, was commencing a ruckus which would warn the girl!

The kid's first shot missed him. The kid's next shot caught his pony in the haunch, and his horse went down; Clay somersaulted into the grass. He saw the cabin door flinging open. Out of it, drawn gun in hand, rushed—Maybe Clay should have guessed it sooner. Only he hadn't. The girl knew Meyerson, of course.

A bullet from the kid's gun thudded into the earth mere inches from Clay. Red, who'd come to a halt the minute the gun-play had started, now recognized Meyerson. The two of them, gunfighter and lawyer, started for Clay with a rush!

On the heels of both Meyerson and Red Wade came Nancy Dallas, who'd rushed out of the cabin, Clay's gun in her hand. The law, she'd thought! They'd been trailed out here, and were being attacked! And she could shoot as well as the lawyer, and she would shoot!

Only now she saw Clay Courtney trying to find shelter behind the body of his fallen pony. And she heard Red crying in explanation to Meyerson, "Caught him snoopin' around outside. Asked him for his membership card, and he claimed—"

Anger rushed up in Nancy. Passionately, desperately, she didn't want Clay here! Not with Dan Starr moaning deliriously, "—made a mistake—shouldn't have—" But love, a thousand times stronger than her anger, rushed up in Nancy, too!

She lifted her voice in a scream. "Don't kill him!"

Meyerson wasn't listening to her. The lawyer was quietly, deliberately taking aim!

Nancy hurled herself into Meyerson, knocked him to one side as his gun exploded. Whirling as Meyerson went down, she sighted carefully, squeezed the trigger of Clay's gun. It had been part of her act, once, to shoot at glass balls thrown up on the stage. She saw her clean shot, accurately aimed, knock the gun out of the hand of the redhead.

The other hombre, who was to be introduced to her later as Al Dixon, had paused to reload. She shouted at him, "Hands up!" She pivoted to include the redhead and Meyerson in the command. "All of you, hands up! Can't you see—" she felt the tears start, deep down within her— "Can't you see he isn't even armed?"

Meyerson was bounding to his feet. He hadn't dropped his gun as he'd gone bowling to one side, but he made no attempt to lift it, threaten her with it. He cried simply, "But, Miss Dallas, you don't understand! Courtney's a spy. Keep *him* covered, savvy? And we'll thrash this out. But don't let him escape!"

The little lawyer's eyes glowed suddenly as, passionately and in a torrent, he explained. He told Nancy about a range hog named Mark Pollinger, here in the south end of the valley. He told her of the plight of the poor, beleaguered settlers in the valley's north end. He told her that the two hombres, Red Wade and Al Dixon, were—

Well, maybe some folks would call them cattle rustlers; cow thieves. But that wasn't what he, Meyerson, called them. They were poor, embattled underdogs fighting for their homes, their herds, their very lives. They stole cattle from Mark, and hid them here in this secret valley until the hue and the cry died down and they could drive

them safely over the east range and sell them. Sure, they did all those terrible things! But who was really in the wrong? The so-called rustlers like Red Wade and Al Dixon? Or the man Pollinger who'd driven them into their offenses against him?

"And where does Clay Courtney fit into this picture, ma'am?" Meyerson asked her. "Why, I'll tell you where. Clay Courtney's refused from the beginnin' to join the association. His sympathies, I reckon, are with Mark Pollinger. And what does that make him, up here, this mornin'? That makes him a spy! And from time immemorial there's been only one fittin' punishment for a spy!

"You savvy, Nancy Dallas? I brought you up here this mornin' because it struck me that the same hide-out would make a perfect hide-out for you. But the situation ain't jest Nancy Dallas, accused of murder. There's more at stake, ma'am, than you. A lot more! I'm helpin' *you*, on the one hand, as an old friend of John Dallas. But I'm also helpin' these men like Red and Al, too. And I'm askin' you—is it fair for their sake to let Clay Courtney, knowin' what he knows now, drift out of here, and take his information out with him?"

The day before, Clay Courtney had said to Ben Tyler: "I can't help rememberin' the time when George Meyerson was Mark's right-hand man." . . . And Clay had said it in the firm belief that Meyerson was still hand in glove with Mark Pollinger; in the belief that Meyerson was organizing gangs of rustlers, only to turn those ill-advised rustlers over to Mark and to the law. But that wasn't the impression that Nancy Dallas got of Meyerson.

Rather, to the girl, there had been a fierce fervor and earnestness in the lawyer's voice as he had told his story of flaming homesteads and evicted settlers! Nancy looked uncertainly at Clay who had risen, come forward, and was standing there. Clay was a spy in the pay of a beast like this Mark Pollinger? Tremulously, Nancy asked Clay:

"Is that right—what Meyerson says?"

Clay Courtney looked back at her levelly. Oddly, Meyerson's passionate statement of the case of the north valley ranchers had impressed Clay, too. Meyerson was a skunk; Meyerson *must* be in Pollinger's pay. Yet what Meyerson had just said had touched Clay, somehow. Clay winced. Wasn't his place here, perhaps? If Meyerson were on the level? Or here anyway, perhaps, even if Meyerson weren't on the level?

"Nancy," said Clay, "some of what George Meyerson's said is substantially correct. I ain't in the association. But, on the other hand—"

He was saying it, suddenly, not to attempt to sway George Meyerson, or Red Wade or Al Dixon. He wasn't pleading for his life. But he was pleading with Nancy. She had to hold him in higher esteem than a spy! She mustn't think that he, in playing his own game in his own way, had the slightest sympathy for a man like Mark Pollinger!

"But on the other hand, I ain't never been on Pollinger's payroll. Not even once. Not even in the past. That there was the highly important information I hoped to give you, tonight. George Meyerson once worked for Pollinger. *I* never did. I—"

AFTER Clay had finally solved the riddle of the man George Meyerson, he was to look back to the events there in the secret valley, that morning, and he was to see the reasons behind everything. He was to understand why Nancy had chosen Meyerson as her confederate, instead of himself. He was to understand why Meyerson should, one moment, demand Clay Courtney's death as a spy, and why Meyerson, the next moment, should soften and leave it up to the girl to pass judgment. But at the time, there was an eerie unreality about it. . . .

He stood there, explaining to Nancy that he, too, hated the valley's ruthless czar, Mark Pollinger. He heard George Meyerson suddenly interrupt:

"Maybe I'm wrong, ma'am. Maybe Courtney ain't a spy. There's the chance, of course, he might simply have happened back into the alley in time to trail you out of town."

Meyerson turned and commenced explaining rapidly to Red Wade and Al Dixon what had happened in town the night before. Meyerson asked, "What about it, boys? That put a different light on everything? Or do we still think—"

The lawyer broke off, turned back, and looked at Nancy Dallas again. Neither Clay nor the girl noticed it, but there was a sudden, unctuous, fawning light in Meyerson's eyes. As if he were saying to the girl, with his glance: "I ain't necessarily cold-blooded and cruel. You wanted Clay's life spared, and whatever you want is what I want, too."

But Clay and the girl were looking at each other, not at Meyerson. Nancy said, "You couldn't understand why I'd left you, and so you—"

Clay nodded, and waited for the girl to explain everything. But she didn't explain. The little moment spun itself out. He saw the sadness and trouble and anxiousness in the depths of her wistful brown eyes. He suddenly wanted, as he'd never wanted anything quite so much, to share those troubles and anxieties with her. But all she said was:

"You've been sweet, Clay Courtney. And I wish— But you'll have to go, now. Leave me." She brightened; tried to coax the sudden sadness out of Clay's face. She knew what he thought of her. To him, with all his young romantic ideals, she was probably the spotless heroine out of a story book. He didn't know that she was condoning a brutal murder. He didn't know how wicked she was. She smiled, took his hand:

"You're worried about me," she said. "But don't wonder about me, and don't worry, please. I know what I'm doing, Clay. I'm in safe hands. And now— This is really good-by."

Clay lingered a second. Meyerson had left them, and was returning, now, with the kid's pony. Meyerson said, "You can borrow Al's nag, Courtney. I'll see you as far as the swingin' rock."

There wasn't very much, it waved over Clay, that he could say. He'd spoken his piece to Nancy Dallas. He'd told her just as he'd reminded Ben Tyler, of Meyerson's one-time connection with Pollinger. If she'd chosen, as Ben Tyler had chosen, to trust the shifty little lawyer, there was nothing he could do.

Misgivings assailed Clay, as he swung up into the saddle of Al Dixon's pony. Nancy handed him his revolver. As a precaution against a sudden right about face from Meyerson and the two rustlers, Clay didn't holster the weapon. But there seemed no need of the precaution. Meyerson had holstered his own gun. The little lawyer's actions were anything but hostile.

Meyerson swung up into the saddle of Red's pony. Clay let the lawyer accompany him back to the swinging rock. Meyerson said to him:

"This contract between you and Pollinger that the kid found in your pocket. I took the liberty of glancin' through it, Clay. It seems danged fair to me."

Clay's forehead puckered. "Meanin' that you'd advise me to sell?"

"Not ordinarily, of course," said Meyerson. "Ordinarily, I'd rather you stay, throw in with us, and help fight Mark. But in the present set of circumstances— As the girl's lawyer, I look at it this way, Clay: If you was to drift out of the country, she could prob'ly be acquitted for lack of evidence. You see? In any sort of trial, you'd be—whether you wanted to be or not—the State's star witness against her. But if you wasn't there to testify that you'd wrote her a note, that whole

business of the note couldn't even be brought up. It'd be mere hear-say evidence, and the judge wouldn't allow it. Yep, I reckon I'd advise you to sell out to Mark, and then high-tail."

Meyerson smiled, dismounted, swung the rock open. "Think it over, Clay," he said. "If you want to help the girl, and I know danged well you do, think it over careful."

Clay rode on through the open portal, thinking it over very carefully indeed. George Meyerson paused there in the rock corridor, smiling the smile of the cat that's swallowed the canary. He'd handled it rather neatly, the little lawyer thought. He'd spared Clay's life —after realizing suddenly that there wasn't any need of killing Clay. The sparing of Clay's life had been a magnificent gesture in the girl's direction! Yet, at the same time, he hadn't run the risk, in sparing Clay, of providing himself, later, with an enemy who might foil his plans. Because he'd planted in Clay's mind the thought that it would be Clay's duty to leave the valley! Neat all around. . . .

For the first time since he'd seen Nancy Dallas, George Meyerson had nothing to worry about.

CHAPTER VIII

Solution of a Murder

IT WAS seven in the morning when Clay Courtney started home, cutting across country, toward his Circle C. It was about seven, also, when those of Mark Pollinger's Tin Cup riders who'd lain in wait to ambush the north valley rustlers the night before, brought their wounded prisoner, Juan Lopez, into the ranchyard of Mark's general headquarters, at the valley's south end. Seven, also, when the governor's nephew, Phil Hodges, left Capitol Hill, and boarded the train for Blue Valley.

Yes, and it was somewhere around seven, too, when the hombre named Sid Jones from the theatrical troupe called at Dr. Greer's house in the Post, and asked to be taken upstairs to the front bedroom where the doc had Jud Tromp, the town marshall, lying in bed.

"There's something," said Sid Jones, "that I think I ought to tell you, Marshal. It just came to me, this morning. We use our wagons, as you know, for dressing rooms. Well, my cue didn't call me on stage until half-way through the second and last act, last night. While I was waiting to be paged, I happened to look out my wagon's window.

"There was a light burning in Miss Dallas's wagon, parked about twenty feet away from mine. I happened to see a man there in her dressing room, standing with his back toward me, bending over something on her table. Now maybe it don't mean anything at all. But it just come to me like a flash, sort of—

"What if this man was in there reading the note Miss Dallas claimed she didn't receive? What if, after reading the note, he got hold of Joe Stevens, the usher who was to take Miss Dallas's answer back, and found out that Miss Dallas had consented to having Courtney brought round. And then what if he—"

"What if he was the person who tried to ambush Courtney? What sense does that make?" Jud asked. "Wouldn't the girl, in that case, have told the truth about receiving the note, and called it to my attention that she'd left the note where somebody else could have found it?"

They talked on, Sid Jones and Jud Tromp. At eight, Jud insisted on getting up in spite of the doc's orders and going round to the show lot to interview the rest of the troupe. At nine, Jud knew all about Dan Starr. . . .

AT NINE, Mark Pollinger swung up into the saddle of his bay, and started north up the valley to Clay Courtney's Circle C. And the same nostalgic sadness which had filled him the day before, filled him today.

Why, he wondered for a moment, was he still warring, battling at fifty? The day was assuredly coming when he'd own the entire valley here, lock stock and barrel. But what would victory mean to him now? He was almost blind. He was childless. He'd sacrificed to his ambitions the woman he'd loved; driven her from him in revulsion and loathing. He'd bartered his eyesight and his hopes of posterity and—His soul? Was there a God who'd thundered in Sinai, "Thou shalt not steal!" and "Thou shalt not kill!"

Toward two, twenty-four hours to the dot after he'd called on Clay Courtney the day before, he rode again into Clay's Circle C. Again a tall tanned, blue-eyed, blond-haired young man—like the young man he, himself once had been; like the young man he'd dreamed of having for a son—came toward him.

Did Mark feel for an instant a surge of admiration for the young man. As he told Mark crisply, curtly, "I've thought it over, Mark, and I ain't sellin'. And now if you'll excuse me, I'm in a hurry."

For an instant, perhaps, Mark did admire the young man's courage. But only for an instant. He crushed the admiration in him as he'd managed to crush his feeling of sadness. What was he? An old woman? Have the courage of your sins, Mark! The young man was darting away from him, back to the pony he'd been feverishly saddling as Mark had ridden in.

Mark lifted his voice. "I'm warnin' you, Courtney!"

The young man wasn't listening; he was getting into his saddle, spurring off.

Mark shouted after him, "Courtney!" And then, huskily: "Courtney, for Gawd's sake come back and—" But Clay Courtney's hoofbeats were disappearing. Clay Courtney hadn't lingered. Mark hadn't been able to warn him. Or would he, Mark wondered, have been weak enough to have warned him? Why should he have singled out this one young man and advised him to beware with whom he associated these next few days? What was it to Mark Pollinger if the trap he was craftily baiting tonight for the Red Wades and the Al Dixons and the Ben Tylers and the rest of them happened to catch Clay Courtney in its merciless jaws, too?

Angry at himself for having become weak and old and sentimental, Mark stalked back to his pony.

MEANTIME Clay Courtney, not fearing any pursuit from Mark Pollinger who couldn't see to follow him, spurred off cross country for the secret canyon and valley, where at dawn he'd left Nancy Dallas and Dan Starr. Jud Tromp had just left Clay a moment or two before Mark had ridden in. Jud had said, "And I ain't sayin' you know where they are, Courtney. But I am sayin' my wire to Gallup City didn't turn 'em up there. That means they've got friends here in the valley. And I've heard now how you gave the girl a big rush, last year."

It took Clay about an hour to reach the mouth of the canyon. The tire marks of the buckboard, which had shown so plainly there in the sand at dawn, he saw had been carefully eradicated. Someone had driven fifteen or twenty steers branded with Ben Tyler's Bar T up here into the canyon mouth. The grazing steers' hoofs had chopped the earth into a meaningless pattern. Reluctantly and in spite of himself, Clay felt a certain admiration for George Meyerson. The man was clever; the man was careful.

Careful, the man had been, indeed. There had been no guardian over the swinging pivot rock earlier that morning. Clay's being captured there had been mere happenstance. Red and Al Dixon had simply chanced, then, to be returning from their unsuccessful raid of the night before. But now, as Clay rode toward the mass of boulders which seemingly blocked the canyon, a rifle barrel suddenly gleamed in the

sunshine atop that mass, and a voice challenged him when he'd ridden within rifle range:

"Hands up, partner!"

Clay recognized the voice. "You, Red? Me; Courtney. All right if I come through?"

The rifle disappeared. Clay brought his pony slowly forward. The rock swung open to greet him, and Red came out, the rifle across his chest now, saying:

"I dunno about this, Courtney. You want to see the girl, huh?"

Clay nodded.

Red said, "Well, Meyerson said, when he left to go to town, that nobody was to be allowed in. But maybe he didn't mean you; seein' you knew, anyway, that she was here."

"Sure," said Clay. It seemed logical, somehow. "He doesn't want any more of your outfit than already know it to find out he's usin' your cattle hide-out to hide the girl. But I don't reckon he meant me."

Or had Meyerson meant him, Clay wondered, as Red allowed him to pass? Had the little lawyer's eagerness to have Clay sell out to Mark and leave the valley, been founded not entirely on solicitude for his client? But something else? Clay's forehead puckered. A faint uneasiness assailed him. Something in the back of his head commenced to develop into a hunch; petered out. . . . Clay rode on.

He left his pony, reins dragging, in front of the tiny cabin; knocked. In an instant the door opened. Nancy Dallas stood there, just inside the threshold, color in her cheeks, a gun in her hand.

"You?" she cried. "But I thought I told you—"

"You did, honey," Clay said. "You told me good-by. But I'm back. I've got some really important information for you, this time. I rode over here to reassure you that Dan Starr didn't kill Joe Stevens."

She stood there, numb, rigid. Clay could guess the thoughts which must be rushing through her. She'd spent almost twenty-four lonely, agonized hours guarding what she'd thought was Dan Starr's guilty secret. Hating herself, despising herself for the rôle she'd assumed, yet knowing that she'd hate and despise herself worse if she gave Dan away. And now it wasn't true? Clay saw suspicion fighting there in her eyes with the joy of relief and deliverance. This was a ruse, maybe! Maybe Clay was lying to her in order to get her to admit that she had been protecting Dan!

Clay smiled at her.

"I can't back up what I'm sayin'. I couldn't, naturally, bring the law with me, and let you hear the story, as I heard it, from Jud. But—"

Nancy nodded. Clay might have stayed out of the association, because he mistrusted Meyerson. And because he felt, perhaps, that the association ought to keep its own hands cleaner in the struggle. But still he wouldn't have been low enough to have brought Jud Tromp up here to the rustlers' hide-out. What Clay had learned about the valley this morning, he'd guard henceforth as a sacred confidence.

Opening the door to let him come all the way in, she stood back. There on the cot, Dan Starr was moaning deliriously, "Danged fool that I was—" It sounded as if a guilty conscience were reproaching Dan for murder. But it couldn't be that, now. Clay said to her:

"—and that's how it is, Nancy. Jud, as soon as he heard of Dan Starr and his jealous rages, jumped—as you jumped, last night—to the conclusion that the murderer must have been Dan; and guessed that you'd denied receivin' my note so's to cast a red herrin' across the trail; scotch for once and for all anybody's guessin' that Dan could have found my note in your dressin' room,

"But after Jud had questioned the troupe, he found it couldn't have been Dan, after all. Dan had a perfect alibi. Dan—long before I'd sent my note—had gone down the street to the Great

Western Saloon with twenty bucks, the night's receipts.

"He'd stayed there, so the croupiers at the Great Western was willin' to swear, gamblin', playin' roulette, tryin' to run the twenty bucks into a stake big enough to take care of that there debt attachment, until them shots rang out. Then, when everybody else piled out of the Great Western, Dan piled out too."

Clay grinned; reached for her hand. How nice it was to comfort her! How happy it made him feel, to see her suddenly so happy. He finished:

"—and so, as I say, Jud rode out to see me, after his telegram to Gallup City failed to find you there. Told me that if I had any idea where you was to be found, he'd appreciate your and Dan's comin' in and surrenderin'. Said that if you told the straightforward truth this time, he was prepared to drop charges against you, and commence lookin' for one o' the show's tough roustabouts."

Clay broke off abruptly. Nancy, so radiantly happy a second ago, had gone suddenly chalk white. Clay stammered, "Why—why, what's the matter? I figgered that let both of you out of it. Jud's already guessed why you might have lied. All you've got to do, now, is—"

She'd sprung to her feet, Nancy. She faced Clay, her eyes agonized in their appeal. She cried, "We've got to get out of here, Clay! Dad and you and I, this very minute! Don't you see, Clay? It was George Meyerson who tried to kill you! It wasn't one of the show's roustabouts! It wasn't robbery! It was Meyerson—"

Nancy wondered suddenly how she could have been so blind! Dan Starr wasn't the only one in the habit of dropping in on her dressing room, was he? Recently the little lawyer had been dropping in, too! Only, with Dan's having sworn to kill Clay, she hadn't thought of George Meyerson until now!

She cried breathlessly, "George Meyerson was the man Sid Jones saw bending over my table. Meyerson read your note, saying that you had some highly important information for me. And he didn't want you to give me that information!"

Clay had already inspected that possibility, and dismissed it, though. Following Nancy as she rushed across the room to Dan Starr's cot, Clay took the man gently under the arm-pits as Nancy took him by the feet. This suggestion of hers that they all flee, he was glad enough to fall in with. Because that had been his mission in coming here; to get her back to town where she would face Jud and clear herself. But while he helped her, Clay found words to calm this sudden panic in her.

He pointed out, just as he'd raised the same objection, himself, the night before: "But, honey, even supposin' Meyerson did read my note to you. How could he have guessed, from the ambiguous way I worded it, that I wanted to see you to talk about him. And even if he had guessed I was goin' to call him a skunk, his murderin' me wouldn't have prevented your hearin' the same sentiments from lots of others."

"But, that's just the point!" cried Nancy. "Don't you see, Clay? Meyerson's not knowing what you were going to talk about! You said you had some highly important information for me! And he jumped to the instant panicky conclusion that that information was—"

Breathlessly as they started toward the door of the cabin, carrying Dan Starr between them, she told Clay of those oil lands of John Dallas, in Texas. The whole thing coming to her in a flash, she explained:

"And Meyerson claimed it was going to be a hard, almost impossible lawsuit to win. But what if that isn't the truth at all? He's been queer and evasive in everything he's told me about the case. What if it's really going to be a ridiculously easy suit to win? And he didn't want me to know

how easy it was going to be, for fear I'd be able to find another lawyer to handle it for me for a lot smaller fee? What if—"

Clay got it, now! Last night, he hadn't known about these oil lands of John Dallas. Last night, he hadn't been able to provide Meyerson with a sufficient and an adequate reason for wanting to do away with him. But now, it clicked!

"Highly important information. . . ." Those words which he had used with intentional ambiguity had nearly cost him his life! Clay had come from Texas only two years ago, hadn't he? Perhaps Clay had known about the oil lands. Just what, Clay couldn't, of course say. But known something about the girl or her father or her father's estate, which George Meyerson hadn't wanted her to learn. Which George Meyerson had been willing to commit murder to prevent her knowing!

Dizziness swam over Clay as he realized abruptly that he was right beyond the slightest possibility of a doubt! Those events in the canyon this morning! They corroborated everything. Meyerson had demanded Clay's death as a spy. And then had softened and backed down. But when had he backed down? Why, only after Clay had said to Nancy Dallas, "George Meyerson once worked for Pollinger. That was the highly important information I'd hoped to give you. . . ." Only, in other words, after Meyerson had learned that Clay's information wasn't of the slightest importance!

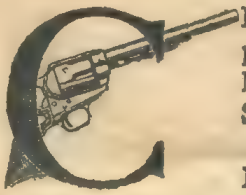
Holding Dan Starr there under the arm-pits—as frenziedly anxious as Nancy, to get out of the valley before Meyerson should return—Clay backed through the narrow cabin doorway.

As he did so, Nancy suddenly cried out. Walking forward, and facing the door, she saw George Meyerson suddenly leap from behind the outside lee of the cabin doorway. Clay with his back to the outdoors, saw nothing except the look of terror on Nancy's face.

The look came too late for a warning. The nerve centers there in Clay's eyes had just commenced to send their message to Clay's brain, when another set of nerve centers at the back of his skull telegraphed a message which got there sooner. He'd been hit, from behind, with a gun-barrel!

CHAPTER IX

Trapped



CLAY COURTNEY pitched forward in a heap on top of Dan Starr.

With a leap, George Meyerson bounded over the two bodies and toward the girl. It didn't even occur to the little lawyer to attempt to persuade Nancy Dallas that the conclusions to which she'd just come, were false. Talking glibly, he'd persuaded her, these past few days, to believe a great many things. But there wasn't the slightest use, he saw, in trying to make her believe that he hadn't killed Joe Stevens and attempted to kill Clay Courtney. She'd guessed—not everything, of course. Not what it was that he'd feared Clay Courtney might be going to tell her! But she knew enough. No use in wasting time arguing with her.

Nancy had dropped Dan Starr's feet and jumped back a step. Meyerson reached her in his bound, as she started to draw the gun from the heavy holster, which—ironically enough—he, himself, had handed to her when he'd left the valley that morning for his office. He flung her hand upward. The gun thundered harmlessly into the ceiling. With a savage twist of her wrist he brought her to her knees at his feet.

He'd clubbed Clay Courtney, instead of shooting him because he hadn't wanted the noise of a shot to bring Red Wade up here. Not at once, at any rate. Not until after he'd had the opportunity to think up some plausible explanation for what he saw must be a double, and perhaps a triple killing.

But now the girl had fired that one shot into the ceiling. Now, outside, Meyerson could hear Red shouting, "Hey, what the hell?" And hear Red's pounding footsteps. Club the girl as he'd intended to? Hell, with the fat already in the fire, he might just as well shoot her and be done with it!

George Meyerson's gun hand moved slowly. . . .

THERE wasn't the physical power in Clay for a mighty lunge or a jump. His Stetson had somewhat cushioned the force of the blow. He'd managed to cling to consciousness by sheer will-power. But he hadn't the strength or the clear brain to do any more than drag himself, totteringly, to his feet. Trying clumsily to draw, his gun seeming to weigh a ton as he attempted to lift it, Clay fell, careened into Meyerson.

Clay jarred Meyerson's gun hand.

The muzzle of the lawyer's gun, there at Nancy Dallas's temple, slid off the girl's forehead as Meyerson pulled the trigger. The heavy slug from the forty-five buried itself in the wall. Meyerson instinctively released Nancy to whirl upon Clay.

Nancy, whose own gun had gone skidding across the cabin floor when Meyerson had twisted her wrist, hadn't the time to get to it. Because there was Clay, the feeble strength in him already expended, slipping down now to his knees. And there was Meyerson swinging his gun round in an arc upon Clay! All Nancy could do was what Clay, himself, had done an instant before. Interfere with the lawyer's aim.

Lunging in, Nancy Dallas now in her turn caught Meyerson's wrist with both her hands, jerked the man's arm up.

Meyerson's shot again went wild. But it was a stalemate, and not a victory. For now, as Meyerson spun back to struggle, hand to hand, with Nancy, Clay was powerless to help. He'd managed at last to draw his own gun. But he didn't dare fire. They were spinning, whirling, shifting position, the girl and the lawyer. To have winged Meyerson and to have missed the girl would have been a difficult shot, had Clay been in complete possession of his faculties. But now, in Clay's fuzzy brain, the very room itself was reeling.

Clay forced himself again to his feet; again staggered forward. The next was like lightning. These few moments of battle had accomplished something. Enough time had elapsed to bring Red Wade into the room. Clay felt a hand seize him by the shirt collar; a fist crashed into his face. His gun slipped from his fingers. He went reeling back. He struck the cabin wall; fell. Simultaneously, he saw Red Wade battle his way between Meyerson and Nancy. Red seized the muzzle of the gun over which the pair of them were fighting; jerked, got undisputed possession of the weapon. Red leaped back, covering Nancy.

George Meyerson shrilled in a scream. "Kill her, Red! Kill her!"

Red didn't shoot. He wasn't a softy, Red. He was rough, tough, hard-boiled. He was up here in Blue Valley fighting Mark Pollinger not because of any noble impulses, not because he cared anything about the justice of the north valley ranchers' cause, but because fighting was his profession. Yet, for all his roughness, it wasn't in the man cold-bloodedly to shoot down a woman, defenseless and disarmed. Red stammered, "Kill her?"

Meyerson had his story now, his explanation. The lawyer shrieked, "She's sold us out, Red! They was talkin' as I approached the cabin, and I overheard 'em plottin'! Clay's been to Jud Tromp and made a trade. Jud's agreed to quash the murder indictment against the gal, in exchange for Clay's tellin' him the location of the valley here! You hear me, Red! Clay come out here to take the girl to town! As soon as she was safely out of the valley he was goin' to turn around and lead Jud out here."

"And that's a lie," cried Nancy Dallas. "What Meyerson overheard us

discussing was the murderer of—"

Clay tried to rise. He got to his hands and knees. Out there in front of him, lying on the floor where he'd dropped it, was his gun. He heard Red's voice bark, "Hold it, Courtney! And you too, Meyerson!" And then: "Now, go on, ma'am. You was sayin'—" Red's tone was abruptly friendly. Clay halted.

Meyerson screamed, "Don't believe her, Red." But Red apparently did believe her!

Amazingly, Clay heard Red say, "I see, ma'am, and then he was goin' to shoot you down in cold blood. Well, I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll keep him covered. You tie his hands behind him."

Clay felt an eerieness sweep over him! It was to be as easy as all this? He watched Nancy move over behind George Meyerson. He saw the little lawyer standing there, with too much respect for Red Wade's deadly shooting accuracy to move; heard him shouting curses, imprecations, threats. As if in a trance, he watched Nancy tie the lawyer's two hands behind his back. Red marched Meyerson over to a chair. Nancy tied the man's feet.

Red said, "And now git a couple more neckerchiefs and tie up Courtney."

Nancy gasped, "Clay? But I thought you—"

"I'm aimin'," said Red quietly, "not to make no mistakes, ma'am. That's all. I'd hate to think, the rest of my life, that I'd condoned the killin' of a defenseless girl. But I'd also hate to think I'd been sap enough to've let a pair of pretty brown eyes and a soft, husky voice be the means of my spendin' the next ten, twenty years in jail.

"I'm holdin' Meyerson prisoner in the event he turns out to be the skunk you say he is. But I'm holdin' you and Courtney prisoner, too. There'll be some more of the boys up here tonight or tomorrow. We'll do a little bit of checkin' up then. Fair enough?"

CHAPTER X

Hate's Harvest

IT WAS some time in the middle of the afternoon when the trio of them—Clay, Nancy and Meyerson—became Red Wade's prisoners. It was some time toward the middle of that same afternoon when Al Dixon rode into Ben Tyler's ranch with his story of having found the herd of Mark's which had been left unattended the night before, still unattended.

"And I look at it this way," the kid said. "Last night, that herd was a come-on. But Mark certainly wouldn't expect us to be fools enough to git caught two nights runnin' in the same trap, would he? My hunch is that that herd's really unattended, this time. Somebody's simply forgot to give the orders to git them cattle, now that they've served their purpose. And it seems to me that a few of us, tonight, could—"

They talked for a while, Ben and the kid. Ben saw the kid's logic. Ben agreed finally to get a couple of neighbors and ride with the kid.

But Ben had his qualms and misgivings. Clay Courtney had said to him, yesterday, "You didn't set yourself up in business with a running iron." And it was true. He'd been, all his life until recently, an honest rancher. And now he was troubled sometimes.

He could see George Meyerson's point: "We're simply fightin' violence with violence; fire with fire." But at the same time he wondered occasionally whether he and his neighbors weren't weakening their cause instead of strengthening it by going, thus, overtly outside the law. Sometimes, it struck Ben that the situation here in Blue Valley had developed recently into merely this—a race between Mark and the Association to determine which side could first catch the other red-handed at its crimes. Victory, these days, was going to go to whichever

set of outlaws whose luck held out longer. This went against the finer principles of the old rancher.

IN the cabin, Red Wade inspected the bonds on George Meyerson and Clay Courtney; bound the girl.

Hours passed. Dan Starr ceased his troubled moaning and drifted off for the first time into calm and untroubled sleep. Clay and Nancy talked. Red went into the lean-to long enough to start coffee and mulligan; came back and took up his post again. George Meyerson sat with his thoughts; his mind slipping back, back, back. . . .

The little lawyer saw himself drifting in here to Blue Valley twenty-two years before; a brilliant but discredited young man from Ohio. He saw himself hanging out his shingle in Gallup City, getting his first case. Mark Pollinger had come in to him one cold December afternoon; retained him to prosecute a neighbor on a promissory note. It had been a particularly cruel set-up. Granted a year's extension on the note, Mark's neighbor could probably have paid it off. But the man had been under heavy medical expense; he simply hadn't the funds.

Mark, insisting upon his pound of flesh to the very letter, had taken his case to a couple of lawyers in Capitol Hill. Neither man, horrified at what Mark proposed to do—evict his neighbor in mid-winter—had been willing to touch the case. George Meyerson had had no such squeamish compunctions. He'd been in Gallup City long enough to have sized up Mark. Mark Pollinger was important already, and was going to be, as time went on, more important. Shrewdly deciding upon which side he ought to butter his bread, George Meyerson had taken the case.

No, he had not won it for Mark, because it hadn't ever gone to court. Mark hadn't, in the end, got his judgment against the man, Hamilton, and evicted him. Hamilton's daughter, Anne, had come to Mark. Mark had married the girl. The suit had been dropped. But still Mark had been more than pleased with the part George Meyerson had played. For the girl mightn't otherwise have married Mark. Not unless Meyerson, actually filing suit upon Mark's behalf, had convinced her that her father's position was hopeless; made her see that she hadn't any other hope of saving her father.

After that first case, Mark had brought Meyerson others. Those next few years, Meyerson had gone up with Mark Pollinger. The time had come when Mark had eventually been paying Meyerson an annual retainer of four thousand dollars. Big money, in those days. But not big enough. Or had it, perhaps, been plenty?

Looking back, George Meyerson wondered occasionally. Had he, perhaps, been a fool to try to get more money out Mark Pollinger than Mark was paying him? To commence stealing from Mark? Holding out on collections? Embezzling funds?

But no, George Meyerson told himself, today. He hadn't been a fool to want more money. He'd been a fool, only, to get caught. Who'd made Mark Pollinger? Whose brains, time and time again, had contrived the misleading wording of some contract upon which Mark later had sued and won a case? Whose brains again and again had kept Mark out of jail? George Meyerson's! George Meyerson had deserved more than Mark had been paying him.

Yes, and he'd deserved more than to be hauled into court by Mark Pollinger to answer for his embezzlement. In his driving egotism and pride in his warped brilliance, George Meyerson never saw it, somehow, that he'd double-crossed Mark. It was just the reverse. Mark had double-crossed him.

There were folks like Clay Courtney who thought he was still working for Mark? Dear Lord! There wasn't a settler in the whole north end of Blue Valley fighting for his home and his herds, who hated Mark more, today, than George Meyerson! Not even the

kid, Al Dixon, whose little sister had died! These days, George Meyerson had had but a single aim, urge, ambition, purpose in life—to translate that bitter hatred in which he held Mark Pollinger into revenge!

The twilight descended in the cabin. Dan Starr recovered consciousness, and, there under the watchful muzzle of Red Wade's gun, heard the story of what had happened. Dan thrilled a little as Clay told the part of the story which dealt with Nancy's motives. Then she did love him, perhaps, after all? But coldness came over Dan, too, as Nancy told him the rest of the story. Clay, it seemed, had done this; and Clay had done that. Every time Nancy mentioned Clay's name, her face lit up. The way she told it, she'd done nothing but blunder. She'd be blundering still, if it hadn't been for Clay's heroism, and Clay's faith in her.

The twilight deepened. Darkness came. There in the cabin, Red Wade lit a lamp. There, outside, in the blackness of the Blue Valley night, kid Al Dixon, Ben Tyler and three neighbors of Ben's rode across Clay Courtney's pasture land to the drift fence separating Clay's Circle C from the old Bar H which now belonged to Mark Pollinger.

Again tonight, the little company of rustlers slipped through the gate. Again they came down into the winding arroyo and followed the dry wash to the point where it opened out into a grassy amphitheater with high clay walls. And again they waited, listening. Ten minutes. Fifteen. A half-hour, maybe.

Then they started forward, edging round the herd to get behind it. The night before, there'd been a blast of gun-fire. Tonight, the kid and Ben and the hombres named Stuart and Svenson and Richter, rode with drawn guns, hair triggers, lifted hammers.

It was the way the kid had figured it out apparently. Mark's men weren't looking for them, tonight.

Ben and Al and the men, Stuart and Svenson and Richter, encircled the herd. They rode into it. Steer after awakened steer got to its feet. They got 'em moving. It didn't take long, five men to fifty odd head of cattle. In five, ten minutes perhaps, they were prodding the herd into a pounding lope up the wash. They forced 'em up out of the wash when the clay walls got low enough. In another half-hour they were thundering across pasture land. They squeezed 'em through Clay's gate. They pivoted and avoided coming within earshot of Clay's cabin. They streaked for the next gate leading into Ben's ranch.

They roared on, the kid, Ben, the others. In the gray light of that next morning's false dawn, they forced their rustled herd, two by two, up the narrow rock corridor between the high chimney walls which led into the secret valley behind the swinging rock.

There in the cabin, Red Wade heard the pound of hoofs. He stepped to the door and called, "You, kid? Back?"

The kid answered him: "Us."

"Well, look, kid," called Red, "bring whoever you've got with you, up here. I've got a problem on my hands."

Five, ten minutes passed.

Clay Courtney, hands bound behind him, feet tied to the legs of a chair, looked up to see Ben Tyler leading the procession into the room. Relief flooded over Clay. He'd been wondering in whose hands he'd eventually find Nancy Dallas's destiny placed. Now, he thought, he couldn't have asked for a better judge than Ben Tyler. Ben represented the Association's more substantial element. He wasn't a firebrand like the volatile kid, Al Dixon. Or a rough, professional gunfighter like Red Wade.

Clay called, "Howdy, Ben."

Ben froze to a halt. "You, Courtney?"

Clay grinned. "I'm one of you, now, Ben. Don't look that way, maybe. But I am. Ready to join the Association. First, because I told Mark Pollinger, at noon yesterday, to go to hell. I'm stayin', see, and diggin' in and fightin'."

He saw Nancy Dallas turn and look at him, approbation in her eyes. Just as he'd known that it would be there. She wouldn't want him to cry quits and abandon his friends in their fight. No, not even if those friends were being duped by a false leader. In that case, it was doubly his duty to stay!

"And second," Clay went on, "because my biggest objection to the Association—George Meyerson—ain't goin' to be an objection much longer. Listen, Ben. . . ."

Meyerson, tied and bound to his chair, cried, "Don't you believe him, Ben."

Red Wade waggled his gun at the lawyer. "You'll git your turn in a minute. Shut up!"

Clay commenced to talk.

And when Clay had finished, Ben Tyler stood there, obviously moved. "And you say—" Ben asked.

"That we can prove it," Nancy Dallas put in. "I signed a contract up here yesterday morning giving George Meyerson the right to commence suit in my behalf to recover whatever inheritance there ought to be coming to me from my father's estate. He hasn't got it in his pocket now. We persuaded Red to search him. But he certainly hasn't thrown it away."

"So our idea, now, Ben," Clay cut in, "is that you send somebody with Meyerson's office keys, to town. If we can produce this here contract, callin' as it does for a seventy-five per cent contingent fee from Nancy, don't we prove our point?"

Clay didn't need to go on. Ben cried, "By golly, you do prove your point! Only excuse Meyerson had for askin' for such a fee was to say the suit was goin' to be a big gamble at the same time. But if it really wasn't goin' to be a difficult suit to win, and if, as you say, that was what he was afraid Clay was going to tell the girl—" Ben broke off. "You, Stuart," he said. "Take Meyerson's keys and ride to town."

Ben turned now to George Meyerson. He said curtly, indicating in advance that he wasn't going to take anything which Meyerson said very seriously, "And now your alibi happens to be what?"

George Meyerson glared at Ben. For a long moment, the little lawyer didn't say anything. The sands of his luck had run out, he guessed. These folk had all trusted him in this war upon Mark Pollinger, because he'd been able to convince them how deeply, passionately, bitterly and truly he hated Mark. But they weren't the sort to condone his attempted brutal killing of Clay and the girl. They were through with him, now, unless—

Unless what? There, in town, in his strong box, the key to which Stuart had already started off with, was the contract. Stuart couldn't help but find it. And once the contract was produced, then there'd be that much actual, tangible evidence of Meyerson's cupidity to back up Clay's and the girl's theory. What should he do? Come clean? Say to them:

"Gents, I did try to kill Clay two nights ago. And my reason for trying to murder both Clay and Nancy, just now, was because they'd got wise to me. But my reason for ambushin' Clay wasn't because I was afraid he knew somethin' about them oil lands of John Dallas. There ain't any oil lands, savvy? There ain't even any John Dallas! Your Nancy Dallas, there, is Nancy Pollinger! Mark's daughter! That's what I was afraid Clay might have found out, and been on the point of tellin' her!"

A couple of seconds passed. In the space of those seconds, George Meyerson saw, passing in review, everything which he'd done this past year. . . .

A year ago, the first night that the Five Starrs had been in the Post, he'd happened to go to the evening performance. For an eerie second, that night, when Nancy had come out on the stage, he'd thought that he was staring at a ghost! The tall, slender young girl with her tawny blond hair and her wist-

fully sad brown eyes was Anne Hamilton! Mark Pollinger's bride of twenty-two years ago!

Then the feeling of eeriness had left him. He'd realized with a rush of common sense that the girl couldn't be Anne. Twenty-two years would have taken their toll of Anne's youthful loveliness. Anne, moreover, wouldn't have come back within hundreds of miles of Blue Valley while Mark Pollinger still lived. His thoughts had slipped back. He'd remembered what had happened six months after Mark had forced the girl to marry him. Her father had died. Her father's death had set Anne free. The bond of fear of what was going to happen to her father, which had held her to Mark, was dissolved. She'd walked out of Mark's house, one day; disappeared, vanished off the face of the earth. Mark's detectives had never found trace of her. Mark had given her up, at last, for dead. And dead she very well might be, by now. But, before dying, she'd borne Mark a child in her exile, had she? A daughter, the existence of whom Mark had never dreamed of, never suspected?

A feeling of power over the man whom he hated had come to George Meyerson. He knew something which Mark would give a fortune to know! How should he turn it to his advantage? Go to Mark and sell his information? Hardly! Why should he make Mark happy? What satisfaction would there be in that?

And then his idea had come to him! Here, in the girl—if she really were Mark's daughter—he'd seen his opportunity for revenging himself upon Mark! In a way a thousand times more subtle and terrible than merely organizing gangs of rustlers to steal Mark's cattle!

Why wouldn't it work? The chances were at least a million to one against Mark's ever discovering the girl here, himself. Not only did Mark seldom visit the Post, but the man was almost blind. The odds, moreover, had been almost as great against anyone else's making the discovery which Meyerson had made. Nobody up here in this end of the valley had ever known Anne Hamilton. And precious few folks who'd been working for Mark at the time of his marriage were working for him today. Nobody else was very apt to guess who the girl was.

Meyerson had buttonholed a member of the troupe. He'd discovered that the girl went by the name of Dallas; believed her father to have been a gallant Texas sheriff who'd died gloriously when she'd been an infant. And this had seemed promising. This had struck him as the sort of story that Mark's wife would, indeed, have told her daughter as the child grew up. But he'd made far surer of it than that. He hadn't worked on any mere hunch.

He probed into the past of the woman who, as Nancy Dallas, had married Dan Starr. It had been difficult, tedious and expensive work. It had cost him three thousand dollars; had required almost a year's time. But in the end he'd assembled all the documentary evidence he needed actually to prove in a court of law that the first Nancy Dallas had been Anne Hamilton Pollinger, that the second Nancy Dallas was Mark's daughter.

Then he'd gone to the girl when the show, again this year, hit the Post. And if the show had omitted the Post from its itinerary this year, it would have made no difference; he'd had a detective keeping him posted on Nancy's whereabouts, all year. He'd gone to Nancy with his fiction of having known the non-existent John Dallas. He'd told her his story of the mythical oil lands.

He'd planned to get the girl's signature upon a contract which would empower him to collect the estate of John Dallas for a seventy-five per cent contingent fee. But he wouldn't date the contract or use it until after Mark Pollinger was killed—as he'd see to it that Mark was ambushed and killed—in this bloody valley war. Then he'd establish the girl's identity! Yes, and then

he'd take this contract of his—worded with sufficient cleverness to cover the possibility of the girl's father being someone other than John Dallas—and go to court. And kill two birds with one stone! Utterly crush the girl with this knowledge, at last, of her real parentage. Take possession at the same time of three quarters of Mark's vast Tin Cup for himself!

There'd been the additional refinements in his scheme made possible by shifting circumstances since then, too. He'd committed his one stupendous error, to be sure. Nervously keeping tabs upon everyone who approached the girl, he'd been watching Clay. He'd seen Clay hand his note to the usher that night; had followed the usher and seen him give the note to Nancy. He'd got into her dressing room while Nancy was on the stage, had read the note, and lost his head for a minute. Jumped to the panicky conclusion that "highly important information" must mean that Clay, too, knew who the girl was. Clay came from Texas. Maybe Clay's folks had known the Anne Hamilton who'd become Nancy Dallas!

Yes, he'd committed that one error. But for a time, it hadn't seemed to matter. It had merely given him this opportunity to bring Nancy Dallas out here, where he could win her sympathies for the north valley ranchers! And make her hate Mark Pollinger!

He sat there, glaring back at Ben Tyler. And he wondered for an instant. Tell Ben all this? Try to persuade Ben to see the set-up as he'd seen it? He sighed. He saw the impossibility of appealing to Ben on those grounds. Ben, the rest of 'em, hated Mark. But they'd recoil in horror from this confession ending in its additional confession that he had, indeed, attempted cold-bloodedly to murder the girl when he'd seen his house of cards toppling about him.

Wearily, fearing that Ben wouldn't believe him, but seeing the futility of changing his story to anything else, George Meyerson commenced to say again what he'd said to Red Wade. "Heard 'em plottin'. You see—"

Abruptly the little lawyer broke off. From somewhere outside in the night came a shot. And then another shot! And then a cry from the man, Stuart, who only an instant before had left the cabin. "Gang! Quick!"

The weary hopelessness left George Meyerson's voice. He cried in a scream, "And there's the proof, too late to save us, of what I've been tryin' to tell you! Courtney's sold us out! Jud's here!"

Nausea rolled up in Clay Courtney. He saw the sudden livid whiteness in Ben Tyler's face; the sudden cold, grim glassiness in Ben's eyes. Ben, who'd been thoroughly and entirely on his side and Nancy's only a second before, was now ready to believe George Meyerson's story, instead.

Outside in the tiny valley, hoofs were pounding! The cabin door was flung open! Stuart was staggering inside, his left shirt sleeve dripping blood! They were being attacked! And who could have told the attackers how to get in here? Where to find the canyon? How, after the canyon was found, to manipulate the mechanism of the swinging boulder? Only Clay Courtney in the opinion, now, of this company here in the cabin!

Clay was the only outsider who knew the secret. Clay must, indeed, have sold them out! Jud had given Clay a certain number of hours, perhaps, to get the girl and Dan Starr out of the valley. Those hours had elapsed. Clay and his friends were safe, Jud thought. And now—

CHAPTER XI

The Miracle

THERE in the hospital at Gallup City, a man named Juan Lopez was dying. They'd told him that he was going to live. They'd threatened him with ten to twenty years in the penitentiary. Then they'd offered to set him free, if

he'd tell what he knew. So, he'd told them what they'd wanted to find out. He'd explained how it was that Mark's cattle could disappear and never be found. There was this secret valley—see? The settlers rushed their stolen herds there. Then there were cow trails, here and there, over the high range. You couldn't drive a herd over 'em. But you could smuggle five or six cows a night out that way. Yep, he'd told 'em everything, double-crossed his partners; and now he, in his turn, had been double-crossed, too. He was dying. . . .

Meantime, pushing his way into the secret valley on the heels of his legally deputized riders, rode Mark Pollinger.

He'd left a single man posted a half-mile south of the tiny herd in the mud wash. When this man had heard the herd being awakened and driven off, he'd loped post-haste back to the old Bar H ranch house, where the sheriff from Gallup City, and Phil Hodges, the investigator, from the Governor's office, and Mark and twenty riders had been waiting. And the instant he'd brought in his tidings, they'd all set out.

They'd hung back far enough so that the men with the stolen herd couldn't hear them. They hadn't hurried. They knew, from Juan Lopez, where the rustlers would be going. All they had to do was to give the rustlers sufficient time to get into their secret valley. Then they'd have all of them! Every man who'd been on the raid!

Mark Pollinger had been careful, lately; refrained—with the Governor threatening to investigate conditions in the valley—for a while from violence. And now his policy had paid dividends. Now here was the Governor's own nephew riding at his side, ready to go back with his report that the north valley ranchers were, indeed, rustling Mark's cattle.

Tonight, Mark saw, meant the end of all further effective opposition to him. He and his men mightn't capture every member of the Association up here in this secret valley, to be sure. But they were delivering the Association its death blow, just the same. Henceforth, as far as the administration at Capitol Hill was concerned, the Association was a lawless band of discredited renegades!

"Victory!" thought Mark.

And tonight he didn't ask himself the question, "Why?" Tonight, he wasn't thinking of his bride, Anne Hamilton. Or of the son whom he'd once longed to have, and hadn't had, and now never would have. . . .

INSIDE the cabin, Ben Tyler's fist lifted from the man's boot tops. Clay, unable to dodge, took the blow squarely in the face. He and his chair crashed backward. The chair smashed. And with the smashing of the chair, Clay was free!

His wrists had been bound, criss-cross, to the back of the chair, each foot to a chair leg. Now, as he thrashed in the chair's wreckage, the chair back came free of the chair seat. Clay was able to slide his bound hands down to the end of a broken spoke. Once the spoke dropped out of his bonds, there was sufficient slack in the handkerchief itself to let Clay slip his hands free. He bounded to his feet, a broken chair leg dangling from each ankle.

He lunged first into Ben Tyler who was nearest to him. He butted Ben bodily against Red Wade who had leaped forward to cut George Meyerson free. The two men crashed into the table. The table went over; the lantern smashed on the floor. But there was no explosion tonight. Simply darkness. Darkness in which Clay might have reached the door of the lean-to; dashed outside to safety. Darkness which he used for another purpose. Shouting, "Dan!" he flung himself toward the chair in which Nancy Dallas was bound.

Dan Starr, whom Red Wade had considered helpless and hadn't bound, was there at Clay's side. In a flash Dan got Clay's idea! There wasn't time to untie Nancy. The two men simply picked

up the chair with the girl in it, bodily! They got as far as the lean-to door, flung it open. A draft of fresh air rushed into the room. Meyerson's voice mounted in a scream: "Get 'em, gang! They sold you out! Make 'em stay here and die like rats, with us!"

The lawyer shrieked it at the top of his lungs. Because here, thought Meyerson, was still his revenge upon Mark! A revenge even more subtle, perhaps, than the one he'd originally planned. Let Nancy Pollinger die here, as the cabin was attacked! Slain by the bullets of her father's minions. Let that be the final way it worked out! He was beaten, now, defeated, any way you looked at it. He couldn't have now what he hoped to have—three fourths of Mark's Tin Cup. But he could have this!

Some time tomorrow Mark Pollinger would come in here. Mark would bend down over the slumped body of a girl bound to a chair. Peering at her through those thick-lensed prisms of his, he'd see. First of all, Anne Hamilton! And then, as the idea dawned, Anne's daughter. His own daughter, whom he'd killed!

"Get 'em," Meyerson shrieked. "Get 'em, you idiots, before they—"

There was an instant rush. Clay, out there in the lean-to, slammed the door shut as the mob of them—Wade, Svenson, Tyler, Dixon, Stuart and Meyerson, too—surged forward. Through his teeth he shot at Dan, "You'll have to drag her, yourself, the rest of the way."

He heard Nancy scream, "No, Clay!"

But all she could do was scream. Red Wade's bonds still held her to the chair. Dan Starr, his every move sheer agony, but with guts enough to endure that agony for Nancy's sake, seized the back of the girl's chair, started dragging it across the lean-to to the door outside. Clay braced himself bodily against the inside door into the cabin, and held it. He heard Nancy scream again. "No! Dan! Please! Not if we can't all get out!"

There was another rush at the inside door, and again Clay held it. Nancy's screams grew fainter. Dan had her outdoors. Clay shouted, "And now, you wild animals in there, listen to reason a minute! Meyerson's your spy! Not me! Let me come back in there, and I'll—"

It had been on the tip of his tongue to say, "And I'll take my place at a cabin window with the rest of you!"

But whatever Clay'd been going to say, he didn't say. Meyerson wasn't a Pollinger spy, of course. None of those members of the Association who had heard Meyerson declaim his hatred of Mark again and again believed what Clay believed for an instant. There was a shot. . . .

A bullet ploughed into the door. Clay felt the white-hot knife thrust of burning lead. He slumped. He went down. The strength ebbed out of him. He hadn't accomplished all that he'd hoped to accomplish. But he'd accomplished, it came to him as the darkness engulfed him, the most important thing. Nancy, by now, was safely in the hands of Mark Pollinger's outfit! Dan wouldn't have any trouble proving to the authorities that the pair of them, at any rate, weren't rustlers.

CLAY COURTNEY opened his eyes. A tight bandage bound him about his left shoulder. The full daylight of early dawn streamed into the bullet-smashed cabin. He lay on the floor, his head in a girl's lap. He was looking up into Nancy's soft and tender brown eyes. She was offering him a drink of water which hurt a little as it trickled down his bruised throat. She was running the cool tips of her fingers through his hair.

Ben Tyler, a bandaged arm dangling limp, was leaning heavily against the wall. The interior of the cabin was a shambles. George Meyerson lay on his back on the floor, a bloody gash across his forehead. The hombre, Stuart, sat limp and white in a chair. Not a man who'd been in the cabin wasn't wounded. And plenty of the rest of

the gents who now filled the cabin were wounded, too. Mark's men, Clay saw. Mark, himself. The sheriff from Gallup City. Clay's head whirled for a second. Mark and his company had forced their way in here? Ben and his crew had surrendered?

It was very still, somehow. You could have heard a pin drop. Mark Pollinger was talking, and there was a strange throaty huskiness in his voice:

"—and that's my complete confession," Mark was saying. "I drove these men into their rustling, Mr. Hodges. The kid, Dixon, there—I burned his folks out. The man, Svenson I—"

A feeling of unreality filled Clay. He'd died, maybe! This might be possible in a different and better world! But it wasn't possible here! Mark Pollinger couldn't really be coming to the the defense of these north valley ranchers whom he'd sworn to crush! Yet that was what Mark was apparently doing! Mark was saying:

"And so you go back to your uncle, the Governor, Mr. Hodges, and tell him that the man really responsible for the bloodshed and the violence here is Mark Pollinger."

Mark's voice trailed. And still you could have heard a pin drop. Because Clay wasn't the only one there in the cabin with the feeling of witnessing a miracle.

Even Nancy didn't understand. All the girl understood was this: The hombres into whose hands she and Dan had fallen had simply whisked her and Dan both out of the range of battle. They'd posted an armed guard over the pair of them. If they weren't rustlers, as Dan was trying to insist, all that could be explained later. Not now. The murderous fusillades had continued. Dawn had broken.

And at last there in the dawn's first light, the sheriff and a tall, powerfully erect man of fifty or so wearing thick-lensed glasses, had finally got round to listening to the story which Dan was trying to tell. Only, the man with the glasses whom the sheriff called Mark Pollinger had abruptly not shown the slightest interest in Dan's story. He'd stood there staring at Nancy herself. Then, trembling in excitement, he'd commenced to question her. Who was she? Where had she come from?

It had been as miraculous, somehow, as this little scene now which she was witnessing with Clay. Mark Pollinger, whom everyone, including Clay himself, had told her was a renegade and a cutthroat, had asked her huskily:

"And—and you say that the man you love is inside there? And that they think he's a spy, and that—" Then Mark had mumbled, "I—I knew your mother, child. And your father, John Dallas."

Mark had instantly lifted his voice, in command, to the others. "Cease firin', pronto! Fall back!" He'd thrown down his guns. He'd taken a white handkerchief and had rushed forward to the cabin.

And now this was the upshot!

Mark had remained inside the cabin five minutes, perhaps. Ben Tyler was to tell them all, later, what he'd said. He'd said:

"Folks, Clay Courtney didn't sell you out. Juan Lopez did."

There in the cabin, they hadn't believed Mark, however. It had looked to them as if Clay were all the guiltier. Otherwise, why should Mark come in here, under his flag of truce, to demand that they let him carry the wounded Clay out? They'd told Mark that they'd respect his white flag. He could return, unharmed, to his own men. But Clay must stay and die with the rest of them. There'd been an instant's silence. Mark, amazingly, had said:

"Supposin' one of you puts a gun in my back. Supposin' he kills me if I'm double-crossin' you. I'm goin' to step to the cabin door and call to the sheriff and an hombre named Hodges to come up here. Maybe you'll set Courtney free, regardless of what you think of him, if I square you, all of you, with the law."

Now he'd kept that promise, Mark

Pollinger. Now, the man Hodges was stammering, "But, good Lord, Pollinger, do you realize what that confession means? It means I'll have to ask the sheriff here to arrest you. It means—"

Mark Pollinger smiled. "I know," he said, "what it means."

CLAY looked up at Nancy. Nancy looked down at Clay. A half-dozen paces away, George Meyerson stirred. A glancing bullet at the very start of the battle had knocked him to the floor. He came to consciousness to behold a tableau—Nancy and her father together!

The situation, thought Meyerson, had changed only a little. He could still have his revenge. His harvest of hate. He lay there wounded and weak. But, summoning every last ounce of his ebbing strength, he reached for the gun which had slipped through his fingers to the floor when he'd fallen. He got it into his hand. There was one bullet, he saw, in the chamber.

Enough!

One bullet, blasting out the life of Nancy Pollinger there before her father's eyes would be sufficient revenge upon Mark Pollinger!

Meyerson lifted the gun, swung from his back onto his side.

Clay Courtney was already moving. Meyerson's full and complete reasons for wanting to kill Nancy, Clay didn't know and wouldn't ever know. But the man's purpose, he did know. The lawyer had attempted to kill Nancy once. He was ready, now, as a desperate, dying gesture to attempt it again. Bounding up in spite of his wound, Clay snatched a gun from a deputy's holster!

Clay squeezed the trigger. Flame leaped. Meyerson's gun went off a split second too late.

There in George Meyerson, the lights went out. Dying, he saw Nancy, pale, white, frozen, startled, but unharmed.

Simultaneously, in Mark Pollinger, a white-hot knife blade ploughed upward into him. George Meyerson's shot, wild and unaimed, caught Mark in the groin.

And thus, perhaps, George Meyerson still had a revenge of sorts?

Hardly!

Mark Pollinger, himself, certainly didn't look upon it that way. A moment before, Phil Hodges had asked him, "You know what that means?" And he'd known, indeed, what his confession had meant. It had meant prison and trial and the eventual shame and ignominy of the gallows. It had meant a long procession of lonely hours when he'd asked himself, before they took him out and adjusted the hangman's noose about his neck, whether he regretted his sacrifice. Whether he'd been a fool to accept the girl's identity so explicitly merely by looking at her. Just because she looked like Anne Hamilton. And there'd have been hours, too, perhaps, when—even if he didn't regret his sacrifice—he'd long to tell the girl who he was.

It was better, a thousand times better this way. He could die in the moment of his strength! His life had at last achieved purpose and meaning and fullness. Why let it be prolonged, in anticlimax, beyond this moment? This first moment he'd ever had of pure and unalloyed happiness?

They moved Mark over onto a blanket. He asked for a pencil and paper. He smiled up at Clay, the embodiment of the son he'd once longed to have. And Clay was going to be his son, now, wasn't he? Clay was going to marry this daughter of his, and be loved by her, as Anne Hamilton had never loved Mark Pollinger.

He grinned at Clay. "Not your fault, boy. Don't worry over it, ever. Either of you. Better for him to've got me than either of you. My life's over. Yours is jest beginnin'."

Then Mark wrote in a firm hand, "Having no issue or kin, I leave and bequeath my ranch to—" He weakened for a moment; strengthened himself. Yes, better write it that way. Better not to cloud the lives of either of them, ever, with the shadow of his daugh-

ter's paternity. Better not, at the same time, ever let the man Dan Starr, who'd finally brought Anne Hamilton happiness, realize that the woman he'd married as Nancy Dallas hadn't ever, probably, been divorced from her husband. . . .

Mark wrote:

"I leave and bequeath my ranch and my herds and my property to Clay Courtney."

"To do with, what you want, Clay," Mark said. "Parts of the Tin Cup was acquired honestly. I—I'd like to have you keep them parts. The rest of it, if you feel that way about it, you can deed back to the folks I took it from."

As he spoke, he reached for the girl's hand; placed it in Clay's.

A few paces away, Dan Starr looked on approvingly. So be it! . . . If a man like Pollinger was ready to make this sacrifice for them, Dan was capable of sacrifice, too. Love like Clay's and Nancy's—the sort of love that could bring a bitter range war to a peaceful end—was too strong and too sacred to interfere with. Dan Starr made the same odd discovery that Mark had made—that for the first time in weeks he was happy.

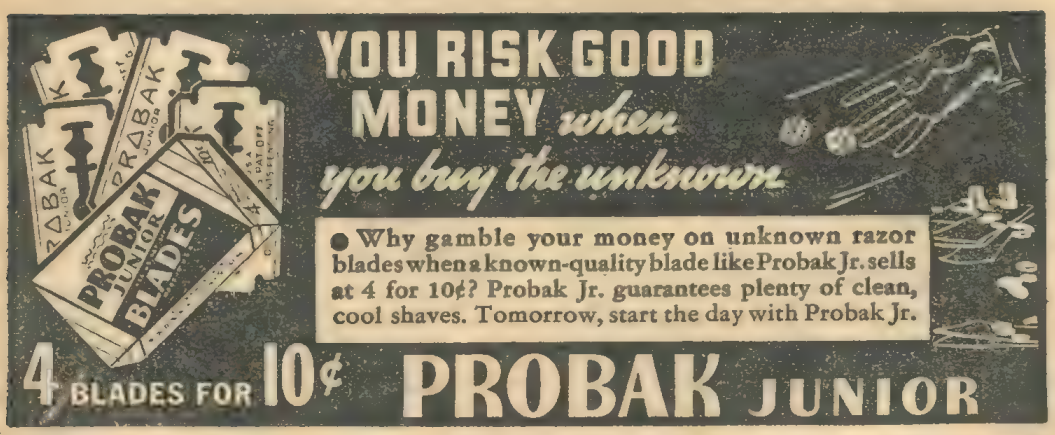
Mark closed his eyes. A sort of tremulousness filled the kid, Al Dixon. He'd taken a fierce and solemn oath, once, that he'd kill Mark. Yet now, here he was bawling as Mark died!

Ben Tyler spoke to Clay: "I've been talkin' to the sheriff. He says his tip didn't come through Jud. He and this Hodges hombre both back up what Mark said about it's bein' Juan Lopez. I'm sorry, Clay."

Clay took Ben's hand. "Forgit it, Ben."

Clay looked at Nancy.

Outside, the last of the dawn's mists had burned off the little valley's grassy pastures. The cattle, stolen the night before from Mark Pollinger, grazed peacefully; symbol of the peace which, henceforth, was to watch over the herds of all of them. Clay didn't speak. Neither did Nancy. They'd been through too much. They'd faced death together. They'd witnessed the miracle of the man Mark Pollinger. Later, each could say to the other, "I love you." Clay could take Nancy in his arms; and Nancy's arms could slip up about Clay's neck. But for the moment it was enough simply to stand there silent, facing the sunrise.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This girl was a product of a desolate wilderness, and she fought and hated and loved as only a wild thing can.

Canyon Girl

By Lulita Crawford Pritchett

DAWN was slow coming to the vast depths of the canyon through the mist of rain. From the cabin on the cedar ledge far down in the cavernous craw of the rocks, Jinny had seen the first sign of gray breaking above the rim.

"We got to go, Limpy," she had told the scrawny old ewe that was her sole companion.

She had buckled on the forty-five that had only one cartridge left in it now, had donned Pete's old slicker, and climbed the tortuous trail up the broken face of the cliff. Climbed slowly, so the lame sheep could follow her. She couldn't bear to leave it to be torn to bits by mountain lions. Pete had found the ewe caught in a rock slide away over in Big Valley, after the herds had moved on. Big Valley was as close as the Mexican shepherds ever came to the twisted, desolate regions of the upper Colorado River.

Hardly anyone knew about the shallows which, in good weather, were

fordable at this point. Sometimes an Indian crossed his pony here, and now and then a grizzled old-timer looking for wild horses. But Jinny had seen no human being since Pete had gone hunting with the Winchester on the high country a week ago and had not returned.

He had left one morning and said he would be home by noon. Game was so plentiful he never had to go far. Jinny had waited till nearly night before she started out to find him. Her shrill call had bounded back at her from the great emptiness around her. Then she had discovered a shod horse track in the red dirt of the hill and a little farther on, Pete's mule with a bullet through its head, and part way down the side of the cliff a little jag of blue that was a piece of Pete's shirt. Someone on the shod horse had killed Pete and thrown him over the cliff. Anyone who knew sign could read that.

Jinny had been so frightened that she had crept back to the cedar ledge and hidden there—till now. Once Pete had said, "The storekeeper in town's got a woman. A white woman. If anything happens to me, you better go to her." Town! Jinny had never been there. Pete had always made the journey alone in the spring and fall for grub and ammunition.

When she had been small he had left her with Old Ute Tom, on the mesa, and since she had grown up she had stayed in the cabin by herself. But she thought she could find her way to the settlements if she could just get a glimpse of the guide tree off to the north.

Jinny reached the rim of the canyon and crouched, panting, in the shelter of an overhanging ledge. The sheep huddled beside her, shivering.

"Storm's lettin' up some," she whispered, and watched the charcoal smudges of cedars emerge on the great hulks of hills. Two thousand feet below her raged the river. Jinny shuddered. She had always hated and feared that roaring brown torrent in spite of the years she had lived beside it. Old Canyon Pete had tried to teach her not to be afraid. He'd showed her how to swim, made her jump off the bank into the surly water and somehow reach the sand bar in the middle. But she always came out of the ordeal pale and shaken.

Pete had had an immense scorn for the river, as little and dried up and shriveled as he'd been. Jinny had seen him ride into the slashing white foam hundreds of times when he crossed over to prospect on the other side. Pete said, "I kin trust the river a heap sight more than I kin trust them two-legged varmints called men."

The girl had no remembrance of a mother and only a dim mental image of someone called Red, who had been her father. He had started to ford the river and something had happened, and he had gone down to his death in the narrows.

Somewhere beyond the canyon was a world Pete called "Outside." Town was there. Jinny had tried to get him to tell her about it. But Pete wasn't much of a talker. And he didn't like folks. Only man he had ever had any use for was Red, and that was why he had raised Red's kid.

Pete was dead now. Jinny stared through the rain. Her heart was pounding as savagely as the river far below. Something ominous lurked in the morning. The thin old ewe was shaking.

"I'll make a fire," thought Jinny. "Just a tiny one to warm the sheep." She gathered up dry cedar twigs that she found under the rock and fire soon licked the stone with smoky tongue. Jinny stretched her hands to the skeleton of a blaze.

A queer feeling gripped her that she was being watched. She stood up, tall and straight, Pete's slicker drooping from her slender shoulders. Her gray eyes were peculiarly brilliant in the bronze of her piquant face and her short red hair was rain spattered and curly in the dampness.

"There's nobody out there," she kept whispering to herself. "There couldn't be anything except what belongs to be." She had purposely chosen this time to leave the canyon. Surely no person would be prowling through the storm and the darkness. And the rain would cover her tracks.

Jinny squatted back on her heels and hugged Limpy. Pretty soon it would be light enough for her to distinguish the guide tree, and then she could lay her course for town.

She couldn't see that figure on the rim rock a hundred yards away. But the man hunkered there, could see the yellow eye of her blaze. All night he had sheltered under a ledge without a fire, his horse tied securely near-by, waiting for dawn. And now dawn was breaking, and he had found what he had come here for. He worked his way through the soggy grass with movement stealthy as a cougar cat's. The mutter of the river covered his approach, and the soft slink of the rain blotted up any noise he made as he wormed around the edge of the sandstone.

"Reach fer thunder!" he snapped.

Jinny didn't reach. With the instinct of the wild, she sprang for the dark. A weight of bone and muscle hit her and she went down. She felt the breath of the man in her face. For the first time in her life she screamed.

"Well, I be—"

He pulled her to the feeble flicker of the fire, stared at her. His arms were strong as cedar boughs, thought Jinny, beating against them.

"A girl!" he ejaculated.

Jinny fought. The panic of a cornered deer was in her eyes.

"Gosh," he said, letting her go. "I ain't goin' to hurt you. Reckon I've made a mistake."

Beside herself with fear, she clawed the old forty-five from its holster and worked the trigger. He went down without another sound, slipping into the wet grass.

She ran with no thought of direction, the sheep at her heels. But after a minute she jerked to a stop, crept back, as if drawn by a magnet. The hat had been knocked from the stranger's head, and the firelight played on his lean brown face, on his yellow hair. She stood panting, looking at him, and then for some reason she knelt and brushed the weeds from the whiteness of his forehead and touched his hair with her fingers. He wasn't like Pete. He was young. . . .

The bullet had hit his head, but now she saw it hadn't gone deep enough to kill him. The old forty-five never did shoot center. She ought to finish him right now. It was a law of hunters never to leave a wounded thing. And Jinny hadn't a doubt that he deserved killing. He must be the enemy who had done for poor old Canyon Pete. She gripped the gun, intending to club it over his head and be done with him. But she couldn't! The weapon fell from her suddenly nerveless grasp.

THE FIRE had almost gone out. The grayness reached cold fingers at her. She backed toward the rock.

It was then that some sixth sense clanged a sharp warning in her brain. There couldn't have been any sound, unless it was the faint rattle of gravel. Jinny stiffened. She shrank under the low lip of the ledge just as something thudded onto the rock above. With a quick twist of her agile body she flung herself into a clump of bushes that filled a crevice and hid under the dripping leaves.

A stodgy figure dropped over the sandstone shelf almost on the precise spot where she had been standing. Apparently he had not seen her. He approached the man on the ground in a crouching walk, gun in hand. Warily, he bent over him, discovered the bloody patch on his head, straightened, and whistled. The signal brought two horsemen crashing through the mist. One of them led a third horse which

no doubt belonged to the man on foot.

"It's him!" husked the short fellow excitedly. "That measly cowboy sheriff—Tuck Lander! Him and the posse must've followed us here and holed up like we done durin' the night. He's shot but he ain't dead."

"Git his gun!" commanded the first horseman, a gaunt, wolfish individual with one arm in a bandanna sling. He rode close and stared down. "Who shot him? Somethin' mighty funny about this."

"Look out, Slade!" warned the other horseman, pausing at a distance. "Mebby Lander's jest shammin'. Mebby it's a trick to git us fer that train robbery. I bet that posse—"

"Shut up, Messner!" snarled the leader. "None of the posse's around or they'd have heard the shot same as us and come foggin'. It's plain they've gone one way and he's took another."

The wounded sheriff stirred and groaned. Slade's eyes glinted.

"Finish him off, Botts!" he hissed. "No—wait! Might be we can use him. Wal, howdy, Tuck," he drawled, seeing that the injured man was returning to consciousness. "Don't look like you was feelin' so chipper!"

Tuck Lander swore and felt for his gun. It was gone. He put a hand to his temple and brought it away wet with his own blood. "Got me, I reckon," he mumbled, a tinge of surprise in his tone.

"Who got you?" demanded Slade, tense again.

The cowboy sheriff shook his head as if puzzled. His eyes roved through the grayness, returned to the three outlaws who had him covered. "'Twarn't nobody," he sighed. "Damned if I didn't do it my own self. I was sneakin' along, and I must have fell over them rocks and the gun I was packin' must have went off. Well, Slade, looks like it's your play."

Jinny's heart pounded. This lean brown sheriff named Tuck Lander had lied. He hadn't told on her. Why? She hardly dared to breathe.

"Hey, boss!" snorted Messner, who had been doing a little scouting, "Here's a sheep!"

"A sheep!" Slade's anxious expression faded in a smug grimace. "Sure!" he ejaculated. "Why not? I seen a sheep around here with that gal when she was callin' fer Pete t'other night just after I helped him over the cliff."

Jinny's fists clenched. So it was this man Slade who had killed Canyon Pete. Her hatred of him was like a sharp knife stabbing out through the rain. She wished with all her might she hadn't shot Tuck Lander. She understood how he'd thought she was one of the bandits when he'd jumped on her the way he had. And now Slade had him and sooner or later Slade would kill him.

"Here's another gun on the ground," yelped the short fellow, Botts. "It's empty."

"The gal must've dropped it," chuckled Slade. "So she's the one that done the shootin'! Mebby you was makin' love to her, Tuck, and she never liked it. Pete didn't tell me he had her hid off up here, but he was powerful backward about showin' me the trail to the crossin'. I had to do considerable persuadin'. You see, I'd got wind of a shallows hereabouts, and I just happened to run onto him. Hadn't seen him fer a good many years, but I knowed him right off, and he knowed me. Of course, if I'd 've went on down to the cabin—there shore must be a cabin—"

"It's comin' daylight," fidgeted Messner. "Let's shag out of here. I hanker to put the river between me and that posse. Bet they ain't fur off."

Thunder cannonaded through the rocks.

"There'll be no crossin' that river after this storm," said Slade. "We're hittin' fer the cabin. I aim to hole up."

"They'll git us there," babbled Botts. "They'll come lookin' fer Tuck and see our tracks in the mud."

Slade accidentally hit his bad arm on the pommel of his saddle. He gritted

an oath through his teeth, and Botts cringed back. "Tie that damn sheriff's hands and git him on your horse," the leader yowled. "Long as we hold him, we're safe. We kin dicker."

"I'll take the sheep along too," said Messner, putting a half hitch around the ewe's legs and slinging it behind his saddle. "It oughta make good eatin'."

Slade roweled bloody spurs into his nag. The tired beast jerked forward. "Come on! Here's the trail!"

Jinny saw the outlaws disappear over the rim with their prisoner, and she ran to the top of the path and peeked down. She had a glimpse of Tuck Lander bound hand and foot to the saddle. But he was riding with head up and shoulders back, riding almost jauntily to the death that Slade would mete out to him when the notion took him.

"Baa-aa!" wailed the old ewe. Messner took his knife and cut her throat and she was still. Jinny saw it all. He'd cut Tuck's throat like that any time he got ready. Any time Slade told him to.

The rain pelted her savagely, but Jinny hardly felt it. She must save Tuck. She had got him into this and now she must do her best to get him out. Tuck who was brave and young, and who had lied to protect her—though he'd never seen her before.

Wonder stirred Jinny. And something deeper that she couldn't comprehend. For a minute the girl stood, gripped by the menace of the roaring river. Then she resolutely followed the outlaws into the canyon.

OLD narrow trails were slippery and perilous and the men had no time to look back. They swore with relief when they reached the cedar bench and solid footing.

Jinny tailed them as closely as she dared, taking advantage of every rock and bush, and when they stopped by Pete's old dugout, she crept behind a tuft of weeds and watched. She couldn't understand much they said on account of the deafening torrent of the river, but her sharp eyes missed nothing. Those heavy bags that Messner was dragging under the shelter of the eaves must be full of loot from the train robbery.

Botts untied Tuck enough to get him off the saddle. Then he turned the prisoner over to Slade and helped Messner unbuckle the soggy cinch straps and picket the fagged horses. Tuck's hands were still bound behind him, and there was nothing he could do but obey the prodding of the outlaw's gun. The blood from his wound had run down in his eyes so he couldn't see and he stumbled and fell over a pack. Slade kicked him savagely.

Something as jagged as lightning tore Jinny's nerves. She forgot caution, forgot she wouldn't have a chance against three desperate men. Eyes blazing, she sprang from her hiding place and flew at Slade. Her small fists were hard from the wood she had chopped and the outdoor work she had done, and her young muscles were strong. She scratched and bit and clawed, knowing no law but the law of the wild.

Slade, taken completely by surprise and handicapped by his bad arm, fell back before her onslaught. She snatched his gun and would have used it if she had found out how, but it was a new-fangled automatic and she couldn't work the safety. By that time Messner had her. Then froth went out of her vision and she saw what a fool she had been.

Slade stood over her, snarling. "Wal, howdy, sister!" he drawled, and landed a stinging blow across her mouth. "That'll learn you!"

Tuck let out a roar and rammed his body upward at the outlaw, but Slade side-stepped, picked up his gun, and clubbed the cowboy.

Jinny did not scream this time. Her

gray eyes glowed like a lynx's. She stopped struggling, and when the outlaw relaxed his grip, she jerked away from him and dropped on her knees by Tuck. Slade made a sign to Messner. He humored her a moment, watching curiously through slitted lids. With soft wet grass she washed the blood from Tuck's forehead and with his neckerchief she made a bandage. The cowboy tried to rally. His lips formed barely audible words: "Git away from here, kid. Don't mind me."

She shook the hair out of her face, went on with her work.

He whispered, "Who are you?"

"I'm Jinny," she said simply.

"Hell!" growled Messner. "What'll we do with 'em?"

"Drag Lander in the cabin," directed Slade. "Set him agin the wall. The gal," he licked his thin lips, "she's a-goin' to git dinner fer us."

Jinny entered the dugout docilely enough. She was thinking of Pete's old skinning knife there on the wall by the fireplace. Sharp, it was. And she could throw it straight and hard. She'd watch her chance. . . .

It came sooner than she expected. Messner went back out to help Botts dress the sheep. Slade sat heavily on the bench. He plucked at the bandage on his arm. The wound was giving him a bad time. "Got any whiskey, gal?" he harshed.

The snake-bite remedy was there in a dusty bottle on the shelf. The handle of the knife was only a foot beyond. Jinny's muscles tensed. She pretended to reach for the bottle, grasped the steel instead, and whirled with the keen blade aimed at his heart.

Spang! Something met it in mid air. Sent it twanging back. A red-hot sliver gored Jinny's cheek and seared the lobe of her ear. With a cry she clapped her palm to the face.

"Shucks now, ain't that too bad!" mocked Slade. His good hand toyed with his smoking gun. "There's only one way to teach red-headed folks."

Tuck heaved against his ropes and a crimson stain showed through the bandage on his forehead. "No use, kid," he panted. "But you're game! Dead game!"

A peculiar gleam was in Slade's eyes. He stared at Jinny and seemed to be seeing someone else. "You're Red's gal, ain't you?" he said suddenly.

"Red!" The name was that of the father she barely recalled. "How'd you know?" she gasped.

"You're the spittin' imagine of him. I been tryin' to recollect where I'd seen you before. Me and Red was old-time friends. Didn't Pete never tell you?"

She shook her head.

"Gimme that whiskey!"

In a daze she handed him the bottle. He grabbed it, wiped it on his shirt, pulled the cork with his teeth, and gulped greedily. Then he leaned back.

"Shore. Red and me traveled together considerable, but he begun to git uppity notions and I had to shoot him. That was when me and him and Pete was prospectin' further down the river."

Jinny felt all the stiffening go out of her. Here was the man who had murdered Red—shot him in the back while he was crossing the river. She could remember enough to piece out the facts. Just a few days ago he had done for good old Pete. And now he had Tuck Lander.

Tuck Lander. . . .

It didn't make any difference that she'd never seen him before today. She knew that he was brave and strong and fine. Knew it with the swift, sure instinct of the wild. And she knew something else too. The same something the coyotes talked about on clear cold moonlit nights in the fall. Their plaintive calls from the canyon rim always gave her a deep hurting lonesomeness. But when this lean brown cowboy looked at her across the room and whispered, "Jinny!" she wasn't lonesome any more. Not even when the rain beat against the walls and the wind howled through the chinking.

Botts came barging in to see about the

Missing Page

Missing Page

the door, and stalked out into the storm. Botts's flabby face looked worried. He tapped his knife nervously on his tin plate.

"Go on and eat!" harshed Slade.

Botts gulped his food and found trouble swallowing. The wind wailed like a trapped thing, and the damp cedar wood in the fireplace burned sullenly. Tuck sagged against his ropes. A thin red line zigzagged down from his forehead.

"Jinny!" his lips said.

What a world of tenderness in that one word! The canyon girl's gray eyes communed with the cowboy's blue ones, and a lifetime of longing was telescoped into one moment of perfect understanding. Jinny knew that this man was not afraid to die, that his only fear was for her. And Tuck knew that this queer little she-thing of the wild had sacrificed her own safety to try to help him and that even now she had no thought for herself.

MESSNER returned by and by. He came in grinning and stamping his feet. "There ain't no posse close," he declared. "I kin tell because a herd of deer is browsin' in that grassy place just back from the rim. They haven't been disturbed. And the rain's come so hard it's plumb washed out our tracks. I figger we're safe and snug."

Slade addressed himself to Tuck. Fever glittered like mica between the outlaw's narrowed lids. "Tryin' to bluff me, huh? Wal, give my respects to Red and Pete!" His claw-like hand sprang to his holster.

Jinny pitched the frying pan. But it missed that ugly wolf face, whanged beyond, and by a freak of fate hit Messner. Slade's aim, however, was disturbed, and his bullet, intended for Tuck, bored into the cedar wall. The outlaw jerked back, stared down at the still figure of Messner.

Botts bent over his fallen pard. "Done fer!" gasped the stubby man. "Dead as heck! It was the handle gouged in."

Slade nodded. "Splittin' that money two ways'll be better'n three, eh, Botts?" was all he said.

The short fellow shifted anxiously. Perhaps he had an inkling that Slade would prefer not to split at all.

"We'll throw him in the river!" cried the leader. "Grab hold, gal. And you, Botts!"

"'Tain't decent," demurred the putty-colored Botts, side-stepping toward the door. "Boss, me and Messner was pards. Lemme jest dig a hole and—"

"Your hearin' gittin' bad?"

He made Jinny and Botts carry Messner to the bank and heave him into the rolling flood. Jinny staggered under the weight. And then he made them get Tuck. A devil of a man, driving them with that ugly-nosed automatic.

"Reckon shootin's too good fer this here cowboy nohow," he said. "Git along thar, gal! Don't be draggin' back!"

Tuck was weak from loss of blood and couldn't struggle much. Botts had reached the crumbling bank now, and he turned and wheezed, "Sling him over!"

"Jinny!" Tuck's wavering cry woke up something inside her. She dug her heels into the mud and clamped onto him.

Snarling, Slade butted forward, gave a vicious push that ripped the cloth under Jinny's grasp. Botts lost his footing, screamed, went cartwheeling into the water. And Tuck toppled down the sheer bank, helpless in his ropes, and slid into the licking waves.

Suddenly Jinny knew what to do. Before Slade guessed her intention, she drove at him, clutched the belt around his skinny middle, and hurled herself backwards. Down they plunged—Slade on top. As the girl felt herself falling into the chasm, panic gripped her. She knew her old sickening fear of the river, knew stark terror as the cold water

whipped over her. But she remembered to push off from shore toward the center current.

She tore loose from Slade, clawed her way up to air, heaved her body into midstream. The outlaw, she sensed, could not swim. He was flailing frantically for the bank, and that was his undoing, for the swift, merciless water caught him, sent him spinning heels over head, smashing down to the dripping teeth of the rapids.

Had Tuck already been pounded against those jagged rocks? There was just a chance that being unable to struggle, he had been swirled by the surface current toward the heart of the stream and lodged against the pile of driftwood. A bare chance.

Jinny blinked the spray from her straining eyes. She saw a black blob of something in the white foam by the wedge of débris. Tuck! As luck would have it, his ropes had caught and held on a snag. Jinny's strength was nearly gone. The icy water cramped her muscles. She couldn't untie Tuck, but she did manage to get him loose from the driftwood.

It was hopeless to try to tow him back against the force of the swollen river. She paddled frenziedly, felt the demon of the canyon pulling her down —down to the rocks. Only one thing to do. She grabbed the end of Tuck's rope, somehow managed to knot the wet hemp around her waist.

If she plunged to the left as far as she could and kept fighting, fighting to the left, she might strike that freak current that would save their lives. All this she thought in the split second before the rocks had them. And then the rope nearly cut her in two and she was battered mercilessly and strangled. Blackness closed over her. . . .

Now sand was pressing in her face. Cold, hard grains. She spit out a mouthful of water and tried to sit up. Sharp pain yanked her back. A rope was around her middle — and there, only half out of the water lay a lean quiet figure.

"Tuck!"

Frantically she undid the ropes and worked over him. She remembered now. They *had* hit the freak current and it had washed them up on this long gravel bank. She thought at first Tuck was dead, but after she had dragged him out in the sand and pumped his arms up and down, pumped with muscles that seemed stiff and slow, he caught a shivering breath, and after that he began to breathe regularly. Tears of relief squeezed out from under her lashes. She laid her tired head on the sand by his.

"Tuck—"

"Jinny!" Such a faint whisper. He tried to get up, fell back.

"You must rest," she told him. "When you're stronger we can climb over the rocks to the cabin. I think the storm's quitting."

It was nearly night before Tuck could negotiate the steep, rocky bank that separated the sand bed from the cedar ledge, and it was three days before he could stick on a horse to ride the dizzy trail out of the canyon. Jinny went with him. At the rim of the great red walls they paused to rest. The horses edged close together and the cowboy sheriff leaned over and circled Jinny in his arms.

"Don't be lookin' back, dear little Jinny. My Jinny!" he said gently. "You and me are headin' over yonder fer them sunny hills!"

"Sunny hills," she repeated, lingeringly, and lifted a trusting little face to his. "But I'd ride with you anywhere, Tuck. Even back into the canyon."

"Blessed little kid," he husked, and kissed her tenderly, and held her close.

Jinny heard no more the roar of the river far below. Heard only the tumult of her lover's heart and knew that out beyond the horizon where he would lead her, she would find her happiness.

Cowgirl Rebel

By Clee Woods

Martha was not the first girl to find her father and her love arrayed against one another, but none knew better than she what to do about it.

THE TALL girl in the blue traveling suit lit from the train running. Witt Zimmerman, smooth tongued and good looking still at thirty-odd years, was waiting for her. She barely nodded to him, snatched bridle reins from a stranger and sent the borrowed iron gray clattering for the courthouse.

Things came to a standstill in the crowded court-room when she pushed in and halted well up the half-filled aisle. A striking young woman at eighteen, she held blond head up proudly. Her eyes were so dark a blue they seemed black in their flash of warning. Everybody expected her to make some dramatic move that would clinch the death sentence on the friendless buckaroo up there in handcuffs.

Martha's eyes did meet and challenge the burning brown eyes of Barney McMillan, the prisoner. But a fierce, tempestuous delight leaped into the girl's

heart. Barney had refused to take the stand and tell the true story of his doings the night her brother Dick was killed.

Although nearly six feet, Barney looked small in comparison to Martha's three giant-like brothers and "Old Major," her father, whose white hair stood up bushy and ungoverned. But Barney had that rare quality of strength and force in his lean, smooth-shaven face, and he was downright handsome.

A tenseness came over the audience. Old Major twisted his massive frame and muttered uneasily under his breath. He knew his daughter better than anybody else did.

Martha listened impatiently while the defense lawyer sought vainly to throw doubt on a witness's testimony regarding his find of McMillan's exact boot tracks near the scene of the shooting. Martha had taken her nerve-wracked mother to a hospital that day after Dick's funeral. Barney had been arrested two days after her departure. When Martha heard how he was being rushed to a steam-roller trial, she took the first train home.

Now arrived, she was torn between two bitter emotions. She loved her lion-like old father and those stalwart brothers lined up there with him. But she often had been a family rebel because of the soft spot in her heart for the underdog. She didn't have to worry about Old Major, who was usually on top of the heap.

All at once her voice interrupted Harper, young McMillan's lawyer. She went striding up the aisle as she demanded, "Put me on the stand!"

Martha felt weak. This was a terrible thing she had to do.

Lawyer Harper stammered, "I—I fear you want the prosecution to put you on the stand."

"No, you put me on," she repeated.

Old Major grunted aloud in rising anger. Harper, still half skeptical, went through the formality of qualifying her as a witness. That done, he was afraid to ask her anything.

"Ask me," Martha prompted, voice dropping low, "where I was on the night my brother was shot."

Harper repeated the question.

"On that night," the girl proclaimed, and her pretty chin tilted upward a trifle, "I was in the old trapper's cabin, far back at the head of Blue Spruce Creek."

At this point Witt Zimmerman came pushing up and sat down beside Bill Vernon, one of Martha's brothers. Of average height and looks, he was dressed in the flashiest of new range garb. He claimed to be an ex-marine officer, but he looked more like a Frontier gambler.

"Was anybody with you that night at the cabin?" Harper asked.

Zimmerman leaped to his feet. "I won't stand for no such questions to this young lady," he shouted. "Martha is just tryin' to help another underdog. But this one is a low, dirty underdog!"

The judge rapped for order. A deputy sheriff made Zimmerman sit down. But he had made a grandstand gesture anyway. However, he did not look into Barney McMillan's eyes, which had changed from lustrous brown to a hue that was more like his wavy auburn hair.

Martha waited until the room was quiet to answer, "Barney McMillan was with me that night."

Old Major interrupted with an angry roar. The massive rancher ran up and clamped a great hand on Martha's shoulder. Martha came to her feet. Something in her eyes stopped a further fury of words from her parent. Nobody paid any attention to the judge's gavel.

"Martha, you never done a thing like that!" Old Major half pleaded.

Martha's face softened. She smiled, and patted Old Major's shoulder.

"Let me tell the jury exactly how it was, Daddy," she persisted.

Old Major pulled back from her. His face took on an ashen color. Martha knew how this was going to hurt him. But Barney McMillan's life was at

stake. Exultation swept over her as she realized that she alone could keep life in that magnificent frame of his; could keep his fierce, proud heart throbbing.

After a clash of lawyers, Martha was telling her story in her own language:

"I met Barney on the rimrock trail an hour before sundown the night Dick was shot. He noticed my horse a-goin' lame, so he took a rock out of the left fore frog."

"Had you ever met McMillan before?"

"Yes, twice."

"Was this rimrock meeting by appointment?"

"Oh, no. I'd been told not to see him any more."

"Who told you that?"

"Dad. Also, Witt Zimmerman didn't like it."

Some girls in the audience giggled. Zimmerman had been paying Martha ardent court the past five months.

"Did you know that your father had sent word to McMillan not to take possession of his little ranch after he'd bought it?"

"Yes."

"And that he'd left a note on McMillan's door saying not to let the sun set on him on that range?"

"Yes. That's why I hunted McMillan up, to persuade him to get out."

"Would he agree to go?"

"No. He said he had borrowed money to finish paying for his little spread, and he wouldn't be run off. I rode with him several miles, still trying to change his mind. Then we happened to see a grizzly. We jumped off our horses and cracked down on the bear. The grizzly got away, for it was well into dusk. But he stampeded both our horses. They broke their bridle reins and clean left us."

"Then?"

"Barney wouldn't let me walk home alone, with a wounded bear in the mountains. Soon rain set in. I slipped and turned an ankle. There was nothing left but for Barney to carry me on his back to the nearest shelter, the old trapper's cabin. The cabin was bare, so we slept hungry on the hard floor in front of the fireplace."

Here the audience expressed a rare tribute to Martha Vernon. Not among all the listeners was there a knowing wink or nod.

There were more questions, then a panicky cross-examination by prosecution. Martha thrust back at the special prosecutor so cleverly that twice the audience laughed. Angered, the prosecutor started framing a question that would have cast a different interpretation on her story.

Coming forward with quick strides, Old Major seized the lawyer by the collar and led him out of the room. His three rugged sons trailed with him.

"Give the case to the jury!" Old Major roared back over his shoulder.

He meant his daughter's testimony to stand just as she had given it.

FTER due time, the jury filed out. Then came back within an hour.

Not guilty. Now that she had won, the verdict left Martha strangely cold. She stepped up to the liberated prisoner.

"Get out of town, Barney," she urged him.

He knew what she meant. Old Major and his sons still thought him guilty of Dick's murder, if in no other way than by having hired it done.

"But," Barney answered, "it'd look like—like I sorter took petticoat evidence and then was afraid to stay and face the music."

Unmindful of onlookers crowded about them, Martha put a slender hand on his arm. Her eyes were pleading. Her heart throbbed to the man's courage. But she dreaded to see that courage pitted against four Vernon men.

"Not if I beg you?" she pleaded.

His eyes were meeting hers. There was pain in their dark depths. He wanted to listen to her, she knew. His

hands clamped onto her shoulders. Martha's head swam dizzily. It was as if they were completely alone. All at once she knew that she loved this man. Loved him madly, fiercely, as she always had dreamed that she would love just once. And he was going out to die, or to kill one of her own brothers. She felt the inevitability of it in the very brittleness of the moment.

"I can't run," he said so low she hardly heard him.

He dropped his hands and pushed out of the room. Martha followed him. From the court-house steps, she watched him go off down the long board walk, toward the busy block of the little Montana town.

He was going after his guns. They said he had left them at Mike Brady's saloon when he'd come in to surrender to the sheriff who had been looking for him.

"And," she heard some man remark in an awed voice, "iffen he comes outa that saloon heeled, the Vernon boys will mow him down a-fore he's ten steps in the open."

Off at the hitch-rack on the side were Old Major and Martha's three brothers. Quiet, square-jawed Bill, well dressed Howard and hot-headed young Curly—all hard giants of the saddle. Martha went over to them as they swung to their big horses. Their manner frightened her.

"Dad, didn't you believe my testimony?" she asked, a pathetic quality coming into her voice.

Bill, Larry and Curly looked off down the street as if she were not within miles of them. Old Major's brows lowered at her.

"From this hour on, I have no daughter," he measured down at her. "I got just four sons—and one of them in his grave while his murderer is turned loose!"

The old rancher's voice almost broke on the harsh judgment. Martha's tall, girlish form came more erect, though her face blanched. Actual pain shot through her heart. She loved these brothers and Old Major. She wanted to beg them not to cast her off. But she had her full share of Vernon pride. And she knew that she was right.

Two or three hundred people followed the four horses of the Vernons down the street. Somebody touched Martha's elbow. As if snatched from a dream, she whirled. Witt Zimmerman.

"Some day, kid," he told her, "you'll realize what it means to have a friend in need. See, everybody is against you for that testimony, because Dick was a favorite in this country."

"Yes, I know."

"Well," Zimmerman exclaimed, "don't you mind if your men folks have disowned you. They've forgot that the Links Dart Ranch is yours, not theirs. Go out and kick 'em off. I'll stand by you, even with my life, sweetheart. If worst comes to worst, we'll go to my ranch in Canada and forget everything."

Zimmerman tried to make his words sound tender. But all Martha noticed was that this was the first time she had ever heard him mention Canada, or ownership of a ranch there.

"Some day," he was continuing, "you'll realize that McMillan kept in your company on purpose while his hired killer went out and shot Dick! You were to be his alibi."

His words brought stark rage into Martha's heart. Suddenly she struck him across the mouth. Then she left him standing with blazing eyes, and strode down the street behind the mob that wanted to be in on the expected kill at the saloon.

What could she do to stop it? Zimmerman had no proof that Barney had hired somebody to shoot Dick. True, the slain Dick had been extremely zealous in protecting her against the advances of anyone whom he suspected of being unworthy of her. He had asked her not to have anything to do with McMillan. But it was preposterous that this mild opposition could have provoked Barney to murder.

Part of Zimmerman's last harangue

came back to her. He knew that she was the actual legal owner of the Links Dart Ranch. An entirely new thought whipped into the girl's mind.

The ranch had come to her through the will of her doting old Uncle Joe when she'd been only nine years old. Naturally, her father had taken charge of it for her, and ever since then it had been handled as family property. Martha had almost forgotten that it was hers exclusively. But it was. And they had disowned her! Also, Zimmerman had been unable to hide the fact that he knew the man who married her would stand with her as owner of the half-million-dollar spread.

And Dick had opposed Zimmerman's courtship of her!

The thought blazed through her mind. Dick had told her that he was going to investigate Zimmerman's past. Zimmerman had shown up here with plenty of spending money and a bold front, but with no pedigree.

The crowd milling in front of the saloon seemed to take it for granted that Barney would get his guns inside and then come out the front door, not the back.

The saloon doors swung open. Martha leaped upon a bench in front of a store. There was Barney, a gun swung low on each hip. A buckaroo among ten thousand! Martha's heart beat in painful ecstasy just to look at him. If he were to go down the next minute, she would be glad that she had loved such a cowboy.

Her brother Curly stepped out into the half-circle that the crowd had left. The timid of heart were beginning to push back. Everybody knew what a hothead this twenty-year-old Curly was.

Curly's voice rose: "McMillan, the law failed to get you. But I'm not failin'. Throw your gun, right here and now!"

Curly was aroused to a killing pitch. But he was man enough to give the hated buckaroo the first grab for hardware.

Barney stood facing the youth, lips tightly closed. He did not want to gain Martha's everlasting hate by killing one or all of her brothers. The street grew almost silent, except for the shuffle of feet of those who tried to back out of direct range.

"Kid," McMillan was saying to Curly, "I ain't honin' to kill you. Go cool off and—"

"I said fight!" Curly snapped him off. "You better, you dirty-hearted cur, for I'm goin' to kill you anyhow!"

Barney McMillan had never before taken such abuse from any man. His hand trembled, he so longed to accommodate the young enemy.

Just then quiet Bill Vernon stepped up and jerked Curly back. "Get outa here, kid," he ordered, "before you get hell shot out of you. I'll take care of McMillan."

Curly would be no match for this lone-wolf buckaroo. Neither would Bill himself. But he was willing to take the risk in Curly's place.

Martha pushed through the crowd to them, but her father seized her.

"Let 'em settle it," he boomed.

"Grab for the shootin' iron, McMillan!" Bill ordered.

Bill didn't wait as Curly had. His hand flew for his Colt handle. But in that bare fraction of time, Barney McMillan whirled on his heels and started away.

"Coward, you mangy coward!" Curly cried.

Curly brought his gun lashing up. But Old Major leaped from daughter to son and knocked the weapon up as it went off.

"We're not shootin' nobody in the back!" he reprimanded Curly. "A noose is more fittin' for him."

A small boy took up Curly's cry of "Coward! Coward!" Then others joined in the stinging taunts. "Yeller! Coyote! Dirty coward! Afraid to fight like a man!"

Martha's emotions were a chaos. She alone knew that of all the men in that throng Barney McMillan least deserved

the name of coward. He had backed down because he had the bigness to do it. She knew that it was half killing him to take the jeers that kept going up.

Zimmerman was pushing in to confront Barney. Zimmerman could not resist his chance to heap more humiliation on the quitter.

"McMillan," he bawled loud enough for everybody to hear, "you can't kill a Vernon and go scotfree when I'm around. You got to fight me!"

He had his hand on his gun handle. His left forefinger was shaking in Barney's face. Every onlooker could see, though, that he had such an advantage that he could kill McMillan before the buckaroo could get his gun clear of the holster. But still Barney wasn't fighting. The bark of one gun might turn loose a veritable hell on boots. He disdained Zimmerman's taunts and started on.

The crowd's jeers arose higher. No mercy for such a coward. Encouraged by the cries, Zimmerman lost his head and spat in Barney's face. It was a vile, savage thing to do. Not even half a man could take that.

Zimmerman, seeing he had gone too far, started to whip his gun upward. Barney's left hand grabbed at the upswinging weapon and his right fist drove for Zimmerman's jaw. Zimmerman reeled under the blow. His gun went off, the bullet nipping Barney's side and killing a bystander. Barney hit Zimmerman again and he fell senseless.

Barney, unmindful of the uproar in the crowd, lifted the unconscious Zimmerman up and strode through the mob. Strangely enough, they opened the way for the man whom they had just agreed was a coward and to be despised. At least, he had risked being killed in order not to start shooting where a miss might kill a bystander.

Barney reached a horse at a hitchrack and threw Zimmerman's body across it. Then he faced back toward the Vernons.

"Folks," he called, "I'm takin' this polecat out to where Dick Vernon was killed. I aim to prove out there—some way, somehow—that he is the jasper what triggered on Dick."

Martha's heart swelled at the strength of soul which was revealed in Barney.

"Cowboy, I got the same feelin' about that," Martha praised. "Take Zimmerman to my ranch house. Keep him there till he's proved guilty. Then—"

Old Major rumbled while crowding his giant bulk nearer. "Nary one minute does McMillan stay in my house," he interrupted angrily.

"Your house?" Martha countered. "That's my house, and you've just said that I'm no longer your daughter, Major! Come on, Barney, let's ride."

It hurt the girl to talk that way to her father. But he had to be jolted out of his unreasoning prejudice against Barney. He was looking at her with mouth agape, more hurt in his eyes than rage. But he called his boys away with him, even against the loud protests of numerous onlookers.

Martha got a buckboard from the livery stable. They put Zimmerman on his back in the buckboard, tied hand and foot. Then she and Barney drove off for the Links Dart Ranch, back there in the purple mountains. Outcasts, both of them.

FOR FOUR days Barney kept Zimmerman virtually a prisoner at the Links Dart. He took him out to the scene of the murder twice, and used every device he could think of to connect Zimmerman with the crime. But never with the least success. Zimmerman remained so consistent in his denials that Martha began to lose faith in her conviction that he was her brother's slayer. In the face of Barney's cocked gun, Zimmerman again accused Barney himself of the crime. And Zimmerman grew so pleading in his avowals of

love to Martha that she could not help pitying him.

Restless, fearing a vague dread in her heart, Martha went back to town to hunt up her father. She could find neither him nor her brothers. But at the post-office she received a startling letter. It was addressed to her dead brother Dick and postmarked at Fort Steele, British Columbia. It read:

> Dear Mr. Vernon:
>
> I have had no reply to my letter of June 18th, in which I stated that we have no knowledge of an American named Zimmerman ever having been in this region, but that we strongly suspect your Zimmerman to be one Henry Gillmore, a gambler who is wanted here for the murder and robbery of a Chinaman. Since the 18th, I have learned that he can be identified positively by a large blue birthmark low on the back of his neck.
>
> If you can make this positive identification, please inform me at once and we will send a constable to secure the man's arrest.
>
> Yours very truly,
>
> J. Wilbur Whitehead,
> Sergeant, Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Martha stood like a statue for two minutes after reading that letter. Slowly through her head the events unfolded in logical sequence. Dick, always anxious to protect her, had somehow learned of Zimmerman's Canadian residence, and written to find out why he had left the Fort Steele region. Having received Sergeant Whitehead's first letter, he must have proceeded to Zimmerman and ordered him to leave the country. Or perhaps Zimmerman had learned of the letter from Fort Steele through the talkative postmaster. Anyway, faced with exposure, the robber and slayer had killed Dick and taken the letter.

Martha made more inquiries for her father. Finally, an old cowpoke informed her:

"Me and Slim Gardner met old Major a-high-tailin' it up the Service Canyon trail. Bill, Curly and Howard with 'im, and 'bout half dozen more fellers—all heeled."

The Service Canyon trail was a less frequented route to the Links Dart. Martha knew instantly that Old Major had taken it in order to reach the ranch unobserved. That many men meant trouble. Old Major, she reasoned, had nursed his rage as long as he could. Now he was going out to call for a showdown, with McMillan. It would be Barney against Old Major's force of ten, and against Zimmerman, too.

Martha galloped over to a fresh horse and sent it on the run for home, without the owner's permission. Terror rode with her. Barney's life might be depending on just the extra fifty yards she could get out of a horse. Old Major must have a start of five miles. But the Service trail was two or three miles longer. And she knew she could snatch a fresh horse at two different places on the way.

"Oh," she agonized aloud, "if Barney only would surrender without a fight. But he won't!"

ON AHEAD at the ranch, other nerves were growing brittle. But Fate, for some perverse reason, chose to give Zimmerman a break against Barney. Zimmerman sat by the closed window, staring out of it in order to avoid the blaze of Barney's dark eyes.

"If you don't come out and tell how you killed Dick Vernon," Barney measured his words, "I'm goin' to wrap green rawhide tight around your throat and tie you out in the sun. We're startin' in half an hour for some place where no human bein' can bear your stranglin' yaps for help. Come on, I'm givin' you jest thirty seconds to start talkin'."

Zimmerman had gone as pale as old bones in the sun. He knew McMillan meant just what he said. But all at once his eyes glared wider. It was growing dusk. But he spied three men creeping upon the house. Two more,

six, seven he saw. Old Major's posse. They must be after McMillan.

Zimmerman decided to stall for time by giving McMillan the confession he wanted. He began hesitatingly to frame a story. But Barney stopped him.

"I didn't ask for lies," he warned.

Zimmerman tried again. Barney rammed a gun into his midriff.

"One more lie," he warned, "and I'm liable to end it right here."

There came to Zimmerman's ear the beat of running hoofs. The hoofbeats struck a strange, panicky fear in Zimmerman's heart, as if he sensed the drum of doom in them. He didn't want Barney to hear them, though, until he knew what it meant. So he began talking in a loud voice. In order not to be interrupted he must please McMillan with his rattle of words. Therefore, he began telling the truth about how he had waylaid Dick Vernon and killed him.

He saw Martha pull her horse to a trot, leap down and run for the house. Saw two of her brothers suddenly leap out, gather her into powerful arms and clamp a hand over her mouth so she could not make an outcry.

"Stop! Listen!" Barney interrupted.

Barney had heard suspicious sounds. But now the time was ripe for the crafty thing that had leaped into Zimmerman's head.

"You're too late, McMillan," he suddenly announced gloatingly. "My friends have come at last. Desperadoes, yes, but all the worse for Martha. Martha just rode up, but they've caught her. I'm leavin' you now. Carryin' little Marty off to marry her. If you turn a hand to stop me my men will take Martha, and they *are* desperate characters. Good-by, Mr. McMillan!"

Assuming a bold front, Zimmerman started for the door. He was risking everything on his stupendous bluff. Just then Zimmerman's words were partly confirmed by a suppressed scream. Probably Martha had succeeded in half uncovering her mouth for a cry of warning to Barney.

Barney recognized her cry. He was going to her, which was exactly what Mr. Zimmerman had hoped he would do.

Barney could not lose a second's time. He suddenly leaped at Zimmerman and whacked him on the head with his gun, which was not what Mr. Zimmerman had hoped he would do. Zimmerman crumpled. Barney dashed out the door and started for the direction of Martha's cry. He could see nobody. But he carried his six-shooter in his hand.

It was natural, then, that the Vernon force should cut loose on him when he dashed into view thus ready for battle. Three guns roared at the same time through the semi-darkness. A bullet raked his neck beneath his chin. He blazed back at the spurts of fire.

Zimmerman's trick had worked. Barney was fighting ten men single-handed, ignorant of who they really were because they were in behind bushes, rocks and fence. He charged the nearest man, holding his fire until he could get close enough for deadly aim. Half a dozen guns let out their talk at him. Then a rifle behind him began to talk. Zimmerman had only faked unconsciousness. Now he was shooting at Barney's back.

While this ordeal was at its hottest, Curly Vernon tried to hold his sister with one hand and shoot with the other. All at once Martha wrenched loose from him and to dash out straight into the line of fire.

"Stop, Daddy! Stop, for God's sake," she screamed.

But it was too deadly a combat. Barney was charging Bill Vernon's position at that very moment. Also, it must have looked to the Vernons as though Zimmerman's rifle was shooting at them, not at Barney.

It was an awful moment for Martha. It seemed that she had no choice but to shoot to save Barney if she were to help him at all. Shoot her own dear ones, too.

Even while she hesitated a bare two

seconds, Barney dent down. A cry of anguish escaped her. Hard on it came Old Major's bellow of triumph. Then, to Martha's amazement, Barney struggled to his feet and started to run back for the house.

"Didn't know it was you folks," he shouted. "Zimmerman said it was his friends."

It seemed as though Barney were offering the information as a sort of apology to her, in case he should be killed before he could ever tell more. Martha darted in behind him, to shield him from her family's guns. He was reeling as he ran.

The rifle roared at them again from the house. Barney reeled. He tried to fire, but his hammer fell on an empty cartridge. He snatched Martha's gun from her hand.

"Barney, stop, you're cleared!" she begged as she ran.

But Barney fired toward the blazing rifle. Three times came swift spurts of fire. The rifle was done. Zimmerman fell out into the yard. He was dead.

The fight was over. Hasty explanations flew back and forth. They found the blue birthmark on Zimmerman's neck, down below the collar, to identify him positively as the Canadian murderer. The Vernons carried Barney and the wounded Bill into the house. With a doctor, both would be well in two weeks.

"Don't look so sheepish and distressed, Dad," Martha smiled at Old Major. "I'll be wanting you for manager of the Links Dart, and strapping big hands like Howard and Curly. And I'm giving you only one order, but it's a strict one. Don't try to run Barney McMillan off his little place any more."

She sat down on the side of Barney's bed and smiled down at him. Barney's arm went about her then and there and pulled her down so he could whisper, "Martha, to make dead certain they obey that order, would you come up to my place and stay—forever?"

"Forever and forever, cowboy!" she whispered back.

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RANCH ROMANCES' amateur page

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Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. No submissions will be returned. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.

Remember?

Remember the night we sat on the rimrock
Counting the stars so bright?
O, the dim outlines of those mountains
Are poignant memories this night.

Remember the call of the night birds
As they darted through black sky?
And the lonely howl of the coyote?
The intruders were you and I.

A. R. Christensen, Basin, Wyo.

Death of Black Jim

The big black sombrero was drawn low over his serious brown eyes. The ominous muzzle of a very old, but deadly looking gun, was pointed at the heavy figure standing erect in one corner of the dark clap-board room.

The gun wavered a trifle in his hand, but his voice came calm and steady. "I'd know you anywhere, Black Jim. When you tied me to the wheel of that buckboard and ran off with my girl, I took good note of your ugly visage. I'm going to kill you now, but first I'm going to beat it out of you what you done with my girl."

The figure in the corner never moved, but stood silent, glowering, dangerously quiet, as if inviting and not fearing any attack, despite being unarmed.

The sombreroed gunnie advanced with a rush. He lifted the heavy gun and swung with all his might. It hit squarely and with a crushing blow on the unprotected chest. The figure in the corner quivered, wavered a trifle, then fell backward with a crash.

The gunman knelt down. "Answer me before I beat your brains to a pulp, you dog! What did you do with her?"

A rustle sounded suddenly in the doorway and a thin, tired voice said, "Dick, pick up my dress model and come out of this dirty attic. I want you to tend Baby Sister for a while."

Cora L. Sams, Crewe, Va.

Western Justice

Judge Parker sat behind his bench,
Rapped for order in the room,
Then he pronounced the solemn words
That would give Jack life or doom.

"The jury finds you guilty, Jack.
I sentence you to life
For rustling friendly neighbors' stock
And causing rangeland strife."

A gasp was heard throughout the court
As May, Jack's young sweetheart,
Rose to her feet and took the blame:
"The rustling was my part."

Then up sprang Ford, a handsome lad
Who long had sought May's hand.
"Your Honor, I rustled them myself,
Me and my outlaw band."

The judge looked puzzled as he glanced
From Ford to Jack to May:
"The evidence is muddled up;
Case is dismissed this day."

Joece Brooks, Shidler, Okla.

Lady Law

There was something about that outlaw when he called her "you poor little kid" that made Linda's heart melt and her terror vanish.

By C. Wiles Hallock

"NOW, NO matter what happens at the Royal Round-Up," Sheriff Harper swung into his saddle, scowling anxiously at his daughter, "keep away from the dump! The Saturday night uproar over there ain't nothin' for you to mix into, even if you are a sheriff's daughter! Charlie and me'll git back soon as we kin."

"Don't worry about me, Dad!" Lithe, dark Linda Harper pressed his hand against her cheek. "Just take care of yourself!"

The sheriff sighed wearily. "'Tain't right to leave you alone—" But just then Charlie Gill, the town marshal, rode up. Together the officers loped away from Mesa Grande toward Cedar Rim, to the north.

Linda, motherless since childhood, was self-reliant and anxious only for her father's safety. She hurried into the sheriff's office and lighted the big kerosene lamp suspended from the ceiling. She sat at the desk and busied herself with routine office work. The nineteen-year-old girl took care of the clerical duties attached to the sheriff's office and was nominally her father's deputy.

By nine o'clock on this sultry summer night, the week-end uproar at the Royal Round-Up saloon just across the street was annoyingly clamorous. The tinny tinkle of a mechanical piano, a rumble of thumping feet and a roar of ribald song punctuated by wild whoops of drunken laughter, rolled into the street like the barking of some evil monster.

"They know Dad and Charlie are away," Linda mused. "They'll tear the lid off." The sharp crack of a gunshot cut short her soliloquy. The separate tones of bedlam swelled to a bellowing

roar. A man came running toward the sheriff's office.

With her father's words ringing in her ears, Linda took from the desk a cartridge belt bearing two guns and buckled it around her slender waist.

Hobe Mullens, the Royal Round-Up's number one roustabout, burst in breathless and wild-eyed. "Where's your father?" he barked. "Charlie Gill ain't around! We got a fracas over to our place."

"Dad and Charlie are tendin' to important business," said Linda sharply.

"Well, what about you?" sneered Mullens, who had no sense of the fitness of things. "You're the deputy, ain't you? But I s'pose you're scared."

"You think so?" Linda cried hotly. Her dark eyes flashed and a warm glow of radiant color surged to her temples as she pinned a star on her blue silk shirtwaist and donned her Stetson. As she ran into the street:

"Big-Nose Fallon was tryin' to shoot a cowpoke," Mullens panted at her shoulder. "Better look out for stray lead!"

But the reckless girl ran straight to the wide-open door and boldly stepped inside.

The wild uproar faded to a faint murmur so suddenly that it startled Linda herself. All but two denizens of the smoke-fogged, liquor-reeking dive realized at once the incongruity of the girl's presence. Amid the disorder of overturned card tables and a litter of cards and chips on the floor, Big-Nose Fallon, a clumsy hulk of a man, stood with arms upraised, growling profanely at a tall, strikingly handsome cowboy who was standing with arms folded and laughing contemptuously. A sixgun lay on the floor between the two men. Fallon's holster was empty.

"What's goin' on here?" Linda cried, striding toward them. Her high voice startled them. Quickly they turned toward her, staring amazed as she stepped between them. Fallon blinked stupidly at her, shaking his head in a bewildered manner. She confronted him frowning, hands on hips, an enchanting picture of angry loveliness.

Then she turned to face the cowboy. He glared at her with a hostile frown. "Huh!" he grunted with a twisted smile, scowling at her badge. "You're the first lady law I ever met up with!" He stooped and picked up Fallon's gun. Fallon turned and shambled over to the bar amid jeering whoops and wild laughter.

The tall cowboy stepped close to Linda. "Lady, you can't make a pinch in this dump," he said in a low tone, handling the gun significantly. "You better light out while the lightin's good!" He jerked his head impatiently toward the door.

Thoroughly enraged, Linda stamped her foot and gazed steadily at the lean, tan face scowling down at her. She noted a light of genuine good nature in his steely blue eyes that belied his scowling fierceness. "Who are you?" she cried, her voice trembling with anger. "Who are you, interferin' with law and passin' out orders?" Then she turned her back to him and took a step toward the bar, placing her hands on the grips of the guns at her belt.

"Put your hands up!" he said sharply. "Don't be a fool!"

The hard menace of his command overawed her. She lifted her hands and faced about. "I suppose you *would* shoot an officer!" she cried bitterly.

"You're no officer!" He smiled sardonically. "You ain't a legal deputy, you ain't of age!" Quickly he crowded her backward toward the wide-open doors, pointing Fallon's gun at her. "This is no place for you."

A sudden commotion in the street cut him short. A din of clattering hoofs, hoarse shouting and gun-fire shattered the air. Instantly the cowboy dropped the gun and sprang forward. So swift was his movement that Linda, with hands still upraised, found herself gasping in his strong arms before she realized what was happening. He ran, carrying her, to the rear of the barroom, and as he ran Linda saw three

masked men stride through the front door with guns blazing.

At the rear, open end of the saloon bar, the cowboy thrust Linda behind the high counter. "Keep out of sight!" he growled. Then he strode forward with his hands up.

Huddled behind the bar, Linda saw fat Jesse Paxton, owner of the Royal Round-Up, stand helplessly with hands overhead while one of the outlaws rifled his cash register and safe. Shifting her gaze to the space before the bar, she saw all the patrons, including the cowboy, lined up at the far side of the room with faces to the wall and hands elevated. Two of the bandits kept them covered, shouting profane threats and turning their pockets inside out.

The third outlaw had completed looting the cash register and safe. "Where's that gal that was here?" he roared then, glancing about.

"Hidin' down at the end of the bar!" one of his companions growled.

As the bandit came toward her, Linda felt frantically for her guns. With a shock of sickening horror she discovered that the cowboy had taken them. The ruffian seized her arm, jerked her to her feet and dragged her forward.

IN A DAZE of terror, Linda was rushed from the saloon between two of the outlaws and was lifted to the arms of the third when he swung into his saddle. She was placed in front of the mounted rider and held in a vise-like embrace. Then the others directed a volley of gunfire at the saloon as all three galloped away.

They rode westward toward the Mile-Away Mountains, following a rude trail, once a way for ore wagons and burro pack trains from long abandoned silver mines in the rugged hills studded with stunted spruce and piñon scrub. Her father's words, "Don't go near the Royal Round-Up," pounded maddeningly in Linda's brain, a counter-rhythm to the thud of hoofs on the stony trail. When they had gone thus furiously about ten minutes, the horses were suddenly slowed to a walk. Almost immediately two shots in quick succession sounded in the direction of the town.

"O.K.!" the girl's captor grunted, as if interpreting the meaning of the shots.

"O.K.!" one of the other ruffians echoed. They plodded ahead at a walk. Within five minutes a rider came alongside and muttered gruffly. At the sound of his voice, Linda all but cried out. She recognized the strange young cowboy.

"Waal, what's the lay?" Linda's captor growled as the horses quickened their pace.

"Couldn't be better, chief!" the cowboy replied. "Them Round-Up chumps think I high-tailed after the sheriff!" He chuckled. "How 'bout me takin' charge of the extra passenger? My hoss is fresher'n yours!"

"Yeah!" grunted the gang leader, whose horse did not take kindly to the unusual burden.

Linda believed her surest hope of safety for the time being lay in absolute non-resistance. The many things her father had told her about lawless men convinced her that to struggle against these scoundrels at the pitch of their reckless excitement might prove fatal. But the curiosity and daring that had led her into this dilemma, combined with the dauntless confidence of youth, checked her terror somewhat and bade her wait patiently for a fighting chance. Accordingly, she permitted herself to be transferred to the cowboy's saddle with a show of complete resignation. As soon as the shift was made, the horses were urged rapidly forward.

But they were climbing now; the trail was exceedingly rough and running was impossible. They moved steadily, nevertheless, with no talking. Despite the inky blackness of the night, Linda knew where they were going. She knew they were crossing the foothills that formed the outposts of the

Mile-Away range, some ten miles west of Mesa Grande. Somewhere in those rugged peaks gloomed a rocky gorge, long identified with projects of cattle rustlers and robbers. She was certain that these renegades had their hide-out in that dark defile called Forgotten Canyon.

As the winding course became steeper, the cowboy's horse, with his extra burden, toiled behind the others. For hours they rode, hours that weighed so heavily on the girl, she ached to her finger-tips. Her weariness was the more oppressive because of the darkness, so dense it seemed to cling to them, and the monotonous clash of steel-shod hoofs on the flinty trail. When it seemed they had plodded thus for days, she suddenly realized that the rhythmic sound of clashing hoofs had altered. Slowly her tired mind informed her that she heard only one horse, that the other three outlaws must be far ahead of her captor.

While she was pondering this matter dully, the horse suddenly stopped. Then the cowboy was on the ground, lifting her from the saddle. "Sh-h-h," he warned softly, placing her on her feet. He turned the horse around and took a lariat from the saddle. Then, to Linda's amazement, he gave the animal a sharp slap on the flank and sent him trotting back down the trail.

"We gotta work fast and silent!" he whispered, dropping the lariat noose over Linda's shoulders, pulling it down and clinching it tight around her waist, leaving her arms free. "Those hombres up ahead'll be back lookin' for us pretty pronto," he whispered. "C'mon!" He set off down the trail at a trot. With the rope coiled up in his right hand, he jerked the completely bewildered Linda along impatiently.

They went about twenty paces before he stopped in front of a huge boulder on the up-mountain side of the path, a great, rough porphyry mass the top of which towered a good thirty feet above the trail-grade. "We're goin' up there," he muttered and, as Linda gasped her amazement, he clambered up the rugged stone with startling agility.

The idea of escape flashed in Linda's mind. Why not slip the noose from around her waist and run down the trail? But the cowboy's words, "Those hombres'll be back lookin' for us," brought realization that to run would not assure escape, even if she got away from him. It was better to be the captive of one outlaw than of four.

A jerk of the rope startled her out of her speculation. "Brace your hands and feet against the rock and start walkin' up," he called softly.

She obeyed. The rugged porphyry presented knobs and ridges that made good toe-holds and hand-grips, and with the help of strong, steady pulls from above, she suddenly arrived on top. "Sit down!" the cowboy growled.

She did so. He crouched beside her, suddenly sprang forward and disappeared. She heard the thud of his landing and felt a sharp tug on the rope. "Don't squeal!" he muttered, as she slipped and clutched frantically at the rock. But down she went and found herself gasping in his arms. But her feet were on solid ground. She realized she had dropped twelve or fifteen feet.

"Now we're safe," he murmured, releasing her instantly, "bein' as you didn't yell. Listen!" He caught his breath sharply. "Here they come!"

Linda heard a clash of hoofs and excited growling of men's voices, and knew that at least two of the outlaws were going by on the trail. "They don't dare go back very far, they might meet up with a posse!" he whispered. "Anyhow, they won't find us. Nobody knows about this place but me and you!" He chuckled harshly. "But we ain't stayin' here, Miss Lady Law."

He struck a match. As the flame flared up, Linda uttered a sharp "Oh!" of dismay. Directly in front of her yawned a great hole in the mountain wall which appeared to be the mouth of a cave. She and her strange captor were in a kind of crevice between the mountain wall and the great boulder,

at the entrance to a cavern so completely concealed by the rock that its existence could not be guessed by wayfarers on the trail.

"This here's my own private hideout," he said, striding into the den-like aperture. "Come on!" He pulled firmly on the rope.

Sheer terror gripped the girl. All that had happened to her seemed trivial compared with the sinister aspect of this yawning, black hole. "No!" she cried, plucking frantically at the rope. "I'm not going in there, no matter what you do."

With one bound that brought him to her, he seized her roughly, covering her mouth with one hand. "You've been a fool plenty for one night," he muttered grimly, dragging her into the cavern. "If you aim to keep on bein' one, I can get plenty tough!"

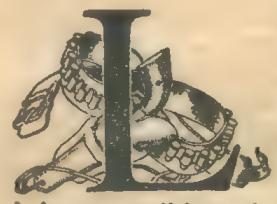
Linda struggled vainly in his strong arms. He half dragged, half carried her thirty or more feet into the side of the mountain before he released her. The impenetrable gloom of this cavernous place was stifling to her. He moved ahead, pulling firmly on the rope to prevent her slipping out of the noose. He pulled her a considerable distance before she heard the scrape of a match and saw it flare up. Then there was a whirring sound, as of the beating of wings, a series of shrill, chirping squeaks and a rush of flying things over her head. She sank to the ground just as a yellow light flared up and came bobbing toward her, and she realized her captor was returning with a lantern. He sat beside her, placing the lantern between his feet.

"Waal, Miss Lady Law," he drawled wearily, "you're quite some safer now than you've been any time since you ambled into the Royal Round-Up!"

Linda gazed about and saw a cave-like passage about four feet wide and seven feet high. "This here's a old mine tunnel," he went on. "Some time after it was dug, there come a landslide down the mountain and left that big rock we climbed over right at the mouth of it. I come onto this place a long time ago.

"Now, you better take yourself a nap, 'cause I ain't riskin' you gettin' all played out. But we ain't stayin' here long. I won't harm you, long as you do as told. There ain't nothin' here to hurt you; those was bats that flew out when we come in." He rolled a cigarette, settled himself as comfortably as possible and proceeded to ignore her completely.

She would try to rest, Linda thought, but she would not close her eyes. The ground and the rock wall were uneven and rough. The air was chill and damp. All this would keep her awake, she thought. She stared at the flickering, smoky lantern, trying to think how she might escape. But she was exhausted, and despite the damp chill of the air she nodded and her eyes closed. Vainly she tried to lift her heavy lids; quickly she lost her hold on consciousness and slept soundly.



LINDA awoke with a start to find her captor bending over her, gazing solemnly into her face. "We're movin' on now," he said gruffly. "Let's go!" He strode about impatiently.

Shivering with cold, Linda wondered how long she had slept. As if reading her thought, "You rested near two hours," he muttered. "You can take that rope off now."

"You're very kind!" she said bitterly, getting to her feet and slipping out of the noose. She ached from head to foot. "Where are we going?" she asked. "And why? Just what would you do if I refused to take another step?"

He leaned wearily against the tunnel wall. "Waal, I could crack you on the head and carry you over my shoulder like a sack of oats," he said languidly. "Or else I could just go on without you. If you think you can get out of here the way we came in, go right ahead and try it. You horned in on this party.

Don't blame me for bein' here! I tried to prevent it."

"Yes, you did!" Her voice crackled with anger. "You shoved me back behind the bar just to keep me out of the way while the hold-up was pulled off, and protected me by stealing my guns."

He stepped up and seized her wrists, gripping them so tightly she writhed with pain. "If you wasn't a gal," he growled through clenched teeth, "I'd knock your block off!" The deadly grimness of his tone terrified her. "Don't you know that our crowd—the Argus gang—is the toughest bunch that ever hid out in Forgotten Canyon? If I hadn't grabbed your guns, you'd 've started something they'd 've finished! You'd still be behind that bar, waitin' for the coroner to come and view the remains! I couldn't keep 'em from carryin' you off, but I brought you here to get you away from those three hombres and mebbe two others waitin' at the hide-out, just as tough as they are, you little fool!"

He thrust her from him with a look of utter scorn, turned his back to her, took up the lantern and strode farther into the tunnel.

Linda by now was overwrought to the pitch of hysterical frenzy, and the withering force of his "you little fool" stung her to the quick. As she staggererd back against the tunnel wall, her right hand dislodged and closed on a piece of loose rock. Beside herself with rage, she hurled the stone—as large as a man's fist—at his retreating figure. It struck him squarely on the back of his head. The lantern clattered on the ground. He pitched forward and sprawled on his face with a groan.

The frenzied girl ran forward, seized the still burning lantern and, without a glance at her prostrate captor, rushed toward the tunnel entrance. "I can climb over that rock somehow," she murmured. "I'll chance eluding those ruffians on the trail."

But when she reached the opening and stepped out into daylight, her heart sank and she sat on the ground sobbing with despair. Her captor had not been bluffing when he said she would be unable to get back to the trail. The great rock before her presented a smooth, concave surface that only an insect could scale. Nor was it possible to get around the huge mass.

The tunnel had been driven into a rock formation jutting out of the mountainside. High, sheer walls of granite porphyry formed barriers to right and left of the tunnel mouth, and it was between these barriers that the great boulder had become wedged when it had rolled down the mountain in the landslide. The narrow crevice was a natural trap.

But Linda remembered the cowboy's rope. Possibly she could toss the noose around the pinnacle of the boulder and somehow pull herself up. She sprang up to reenter the tunnel, but a sound on the other side of the rock arrested her—the sound of men's voices.

"If they'd aimed to go back down the trail, they wouldn't 've left the hoss," one of the speakers growled.

"You mean they went on foot to a hide-out somewheres around here?" another voice boomed.

"Yeah. 'Twas right along here somewheres that they sneaked out on us. So they must've went right up the side of the mountain."

"Where the hell is there any place to hide up there?" growled the second speaker.

"Well, what about this pile of rock?" The first speaker lowered his voice slightly. "I've always claimed that cowpoke was a sneak."

Linda's heart was in her throat. She did not wait to hear more. Silently she crept back into the tunnel, shuddering with fear at the thought that the bandits might already be scaling the great boulder. Should they climb the mountain on either side of the rock, they would not have to go more than fifty feet before they could look down into the crevice and discover the tunnel.

Her captor was sitting up, holding his head in his hands. She knelt be-

side him. "You're right," she murmured, "I've been the worst kind of a fool. But listen. The others, two of them at least, are coming. I heard them talking on the trail. They've figured things out, they may be over the rock by now!" She extinguished the lantern flame. "Come, get on your feet!"

He scrambled up, swaying drunkenly. "Dizzy," he mumbled. "You 'most killed me!" Sickened by the pain in his head, he leaned against the tunnel wall. Linda took up the rope and the lantern, then placed her right arm around the cowboy's waist, whispering, "Lean on me. We must go. Do you understand?"

He dropped his left arm across her shoulders, leaning heavily on her. "Yeah!" he groaned, "Gotta go!" and stumbled forward. "Gotta go!"

They moved ahead into the black of the tunnel, stumbling and groping. In an agony of fear, with tears streaming down her cheeks, Linda dragged him along. He leaned so heavily on her, she all but sank under his weight. "Dizzy," he mumbled thickly. "Can't go very steady." But he kept going. And Linda, half carrying him, was strangely, crazily overwhelmed with pity for him, and cried because she had hurt him.

But gradually, as they groped in the clinging blackness, his stride became firmer and the crushing press of his arm across her shoulders became lighter. Suddenly he straightened, disengaged himself from the clasp of her arm and whispered: "I'm O.K. now, you poor little kid!" Then with a force that crushed the breath from her body, she was clasped in his arms and felt his burning lips on her face. She felt hot tears she knew were not her own burning her cheeks, and heard him gasping, "You poor little kid!"

Then they were lurching, stumbling, running forward, his great hand clasping her arm. "Hurry, hurry!" he gasped. "They're on our trail!"

"The difference between them and us," he whispered, "is that I know this place and they don't. There's two ways to get in, but only one way to get out." They pressed on, groping, running, stumbling. She saw occasional flares of light—like fireflies—in the gloom behind them, and knew the bandits were striking matches to see their way ahead. But she heard nothing back there.

"This drift goes straight into the mountain 'bout a quarter of a mile," her captor murmured. "Then we come to a right-angle cross-cut. We turn left. If them hombres turn right, we'll gain on 'em."

It seemed to Linda they went miles before they turned left into the cross-cut. She knew they were now going in the same direction they had traveled on the trail. She noted that the tunnel floor ranged upward, that they were climbing, and that the passage narrowed. "Now we only got 'bout five hundred yards to go till we're out," he murmured. "Keep your head down. The roof gets lower and lower."

But before they had gone two hundred feet, he halted suddenly. "Something's wrong up ahead," he muttered. "We'd ought to see daylight shinin' down where we climb out at the surface!" His manner betrayed genuine alarm. "Listen, little Lady Law, whatever you think about me, bein' a bandit and all, I'm aimin' to protect you. I figgered nobody in the whole world knew about this hide-out exceptin' me. But something's happened in front of us, because we can't see daylight. But we got to go on. If we've got to put up a fight"—he pressed her pistols into her hands—"I'll fight to the finish to keep anybody from harmin' you. I just wanted to say that and tell you I'm sorry I talked mean to you, even if you don't believe me! C'm'on!" He gripped her wrist tightly and strode ahead.

"Whoever you are, whatever you are, I believe you!" Linda gasped. "And I'm terribly sorry I hit you with that rock."

"Sh-h-h," he warned. "We gotta go slow and silent." They crept forward on a sharply ascending grade, stooping low to avoid the jagged rock roof.

They had to go single file now, because of the narrowness of the bore. When they had gone a short distance, practically on hands and knees, the cowboy leading the way, a sudden, ear-splitting roar and the sharp *ping* of a bullet striking a rock in the ground behind them crashed through the gloom.

Instantly the cowboy was crowding past her, almost scrambling over her, to shield her. "I'll stop any bullets comin' this way—not you!" he murmured. And no sooner was the girl ahead of him than another gunshot roared. But no bullet struck near them this time.

"Them scoundrels are at the junction of the main tunnel and the cross-cut," he whispered. "They don't know which way to go. They fired a shot each way in the cross-cut, hopin' for us to shoot back at 'em so they'd know which way we went. You go on ahead with me behind you."

He stopped speaking with a sharp, hissing intake of breath, pulling Linda back as she started on. "Listen, up ahead there!" But even before he spoke she had caught the sound, a muttering of men's voices not more than fifty feet away!

But the sound did not terrify her. Rather, it had a soothing effect, an effect that made her think: I'm dreaming and all this has been just a horrible nightmare! For those voices up ahead were as familiar to her as her own. Those muttering men in the black bore ahead were her father and Charlie Gill, marshal of Mesa Grande!

It didn't make sense, but it was so. She could not be mistaken. Deliverance! Deliverance for her, yes. But what of this buckaroo bandit, her captor? Was he really her captor—or her captive, after all? And why did she feel suddenly cold and unhappily sick at heart?

"Listen," he was whispering, "did you hear them voices? D'you know who them hombres are? One of 'em's your father. You're safe now, see? You're almost rescued."

"Yes!" she gasped. "But what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I ain't gonna hurt 'em, don't worry!" he growled, with that tone of scorn that made him seem so implacable, that contrasted so strangely with his gentleness a few minutes before when he had crushed her in his arms and called her a "poor little kid."

"I didn't mean that!" she sobbed violently. "Even though you're an outlaw, I'm not ungrateful for what you've done for me! If you go back, your bandit companions will kill you! And if you go on with me, my father will arrest you! That's what I meant!"

"Waal, I ain't aimin' to get killed," he whispered. "I'm goin' ahead with you, Miss Lady Law!" He pressed her hand gently. "You poor little kid!" he murmured tenderly, then: "It's a sheriff's business to round up bandits! Now listen! You call out to your father as soft as you can, and go ahead to meet him. I'll come along right behind you."

Half dazed, still wondering if she were mad or in the trance of a nightmare, Linda groped forward. "Dad!" she called softly. "Dad, Charlie, are you there! It's Linda, Dad. Don't make any noise. Don't strike a light or we'll get killed."

There was a stifled exclamation and a rushing scramble, then the voice of Sheriff Harper muttering hoarsely, "Linda, my girl—my girl. What in the name of all that's haywire are you doin' here?" Then she was in his arms, sobbing, laughing, murmuring wildly:

"Don't make any noise, Dad and Charlie! There's a young man behind me, here, who saved me from the bandits. The Argus gang, they're trailing us, Dad."

"I'm one of 'em, Sheriff," the cowboy murmured. "I'm surrenderin'. We gotta get outa here pronto!"

Then they were hurrying up a rickety, wooden ladder from the pit at the end of the cross-cut and scrambling to the surface. Linda swayed dizzily, blinded by the glare of sunlight, unable at once to accustom herself to the

wide expanse of earth and sky that seemed to be swirling about her. Charlie Gill ran to his horse standing near-by, and returned with a canteen. When she had swallowed a little tepid water, things stopped whirling around and she saw that they were on top of the mountain ridge that formed the east rampart of Forgotten Canyon, a barren summit studded with great boulders. The cowboy was speaking excitedly:

"We ain't got time to parley about things now, Sheriff! Get your gal under cover. Them's bad hombres on our trail, plenty tough and desperate. Get ready for 'em before they come up out of that prospect hole."

A gunshot in the tunnel galvanized the officers to action. Sheriff Harper and Linda ran behind a great boulder some thirty feet from the pit. Gill and the cowboy ducked behind a smaller rock, not more than three feet high and only eight or ten paces from the shaft. Gill had disarmed the cowboy when he surrendered in the tunnel.

Almost immediately the outlaws came to the surface. Linda risked being seen to observe them, and shuddered to find that there were three of them. They were visibly startled at sight of the officers' horses and stared about cautiously with guns ready for instant action.

The sight of the horses convinced them that they were covered by guns of the law behind some of those rocks. They crouched at the edge of the prospect hole, as if intending to creep back down the ladder.

"Throw down your guns, men!" the sheriff yelled. "The game's up!" A volley of gun-fire and a spatter of bullets against the great boulder was their answer. But the cowboy, whose position afforded him a clear view of the pit, saw two of them disappear over the edge. The third ran—apparently unseen by Gill or Harper—to a rock large enough to shelter him, half-way between the pit and the great boulder.

It was evident to the cowboy that this reckless outlaw planned to reach the great boulder, circle it and surprise the sheriff and Linda. He might be able to do this without being seen by Gill.

"Gimme my guns!" the cowboy whispered to Gill.

"I put your guns in my saddle bag when I got the canteen," Gill replied.

"Then gimme one of yours!"

"Nothin' doin'!" Gill grunted. "The sheriff and me'll handle this!"

But if that daring ruffian should succeed in reaching the great boulder, Linda and her father would be in deadly peril. The other two outlaws could do no damage temporarily. They were in a hole ten or twelve feet below the ground surface. If they came up the ladder, the sheriff and the marshal could both engage them instantly.

The cowboy sprang to his feet and ran full speed toward the bandit's rock. "Mebbe I can get there," he murmured, "and jump onto him before he—"

But the bandit's gun roared. He heard his hatband rip and felt a searing, stabbing crash of pain, as if a red-hot poker were pressing against the side of his head. Everything went black—and he collapsed.

When consciousness returned he was lying with his head swathed in a wet cloth and pillowed on something soft. The sheriff was speaking:

"I got a letter signed *'B. Z.'* that sent me and Gill up to the stage road yesterday. It said two of the Argus gang aimed to stick up the stage. We follered directions explicit, and nabbed 'em. They're in jail at Cedar Rim. Then, still follerin' directions in the letter, we high-tailed up here. Judgin' from what you've said regardin' what happened to you, this lad must be *B. Z.!*"

"Yes, he must be" said Linda, who was sobbing.

The cowboy opened his eyes and sat up. They were in the shade of the great boulder. Said the sheriff, "You better lie still. The bullet creased the side of your head."

"I'm O.K. Where's the others?"

"Gill's takin' 'em to town. One's ridin' his hoss, shot up pretty bad, the one that plugged you. The others give up after we got him."

"Waal, I'm shore glad you and the marshal got here in time to meet the little lady and me. But I wasn't expectin' you to come right into the tunnel. That had me worried for a spell. My name's Bob Zanderer. My folks own the Zanderer ranch, down in the draw east of here 'bout a mile. I'm a deputy marshal, Sheriff. I ain't got my badge with me, though. Couldn't wear it whilst I was bein' one of the Argus gang!" He chuckled boyishly.

"I went to Denver 'bout a month back and got swore in so's I could round up that outfit. Then I joined up with 'em. I've always craved to do detective work, and ever since I was a kid I've known about that old tunnel. I figgered I could use it, somehow, in bustin' the gang.

"I knew they was aimin' to stick up the saloon when I tipped you to the stage job. I figgered the saloon crowd would form a posse and tail us, and I aimed to decoy the gang into the tunnel on the pretext of losin' the posse, but at the same time to lead 'em out through the prospect hole where you could grab 'em. Natcherly, I didn't crave to get into a battle with a posse.

"But I wasn't expectin' to have to protect a gal from the rest of the gang, and besides, no posse showed up. So I took to the tunnel with Miss Lady Law, just to save her from the gang!"

Sheriff Harper stared at him, too dumbfounded to speak. But Linda, close beside him, cried, "But why didn't you explain all this to me in the tunnel, Bob?"

"You wouldn't 've believed me, Linda," he said gently. "You couldn't believe I was protectin' you till things got pretty hot, you poor little kid!"

"Will you forgive me?" she murmured, gently placing her arms around his neck. "I love the way you say, 'You poor little kid!' "

Their lips met. Then—

"Sheriff," said Bob Zanderer, "I'm hopin' to marry your daughter and be your deputy!"

Sheriff Harper got to his feet, still staring dazedly. "I don't see how I kin do anything to prevent you!" he sighed. "I guess you kin make her mind better'n I kin!"

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Always and Forever

By L. Lindley Mulkey

The velvet-eyed Laura bore another man's name, but the cowboy stranger wore her heart proudly through those desperate days.

CLAYVILLE was the typical cattle town—rutted streets, narrow board sidewalks, false-fronted wooden buildings with peeling paint. Scattered through the rangelands, were dozens of towns like it. But to Dane Dustin, Clayville stood out from the others like a Brahma in a herd of white-faces.

"When this job's finished, I'm through," Dane mused grimly, tying his tall roan in front of the Madison House.

Standing there in the early evening light, a definite fatigue tugged at his big frame. He wore the usual range attire: leather bat-wing chaps, open-throated flannel shirt, a rakish roll-brimmed Stetson tipped low over piercing gray eyes. Yet an unswerving purpose in the set of jaw and chin, set Dane Dustin as much apart from other

riders as the letter in his breast pocket set Clayville apart from other towns. Dane Dustin's hand brushed the pocket now, just to make sure the letter was still there—the letter which held the key to all those weary dusty miles behind.

"Pardon, but—er—I wonder if you'd do me a favor, brother."

Dane Dustin turned to find a tall thin-faced man in a rusty frock coat standing beside him.

"A favor?"

"I'm Reverend Hanley," the other explained apologetically. "I've been called to perform a rather hurried marriage ceremony. Would you be kind enough to act as one of the witnesses?"

A rising mirth awoke in Dustin's gray eyes. "It's a little out of my line, but if—"

"Fine! Just step this way. It'll only take a few minutes. Everyone else seemed to be at supper."

The tall rider followed Reverend Hanley into the Madison House and up a flight of dusty stairs. They stopped before a door at the end of the hall.

"There's nothing for you to do," explained the minister, "except, of course, to sign the marriage certificate after the ceremony's over."

There were three occupants in the room which they entered—two men and a woman. One man lay prone on an old horsehair sofa, a blanket covering his wasted frame. Past middle age he was, with pasty-white face dominated by blazing bright blue eyes. Dane Dustin felt the magnetism of those eyes even as he noted their cold unflinching cruelty. The other man stood nearby, his tall lank body etched against the lamplight. Pale eyes, divided by a high thin nose, regarded Dane with a steady rapacious light.

"A sweet pair!" thought Dane Dustin.

"We're ready now, Miss Hofford, Reverend Hanley said.

The girl had been standing at the window, staring out into the gathering dark. Slowly she turned, as if steeling herself to some unbearable ordeal. One by one the lamplight limned her features—straight little nose above curving sensitive lips, fathomless dark eyes, framed by lustrous blue-black curls. Dane Dustin's breath sucked inward. The most beautiful girl in the world—a girl such as he had dreamed of some day meeting! During long lonely nights by his campfire, he had visioned just such a combination of satiny hair and dark liquid eyes.

"If you'll step over by the sofa, Miss Hofford, here beside Mr. Phelps."

Dane Dustin suddenly stiffened. Phelps! Braden Phelps, cattleman and owner of the Clayville bank! Dane had heard of him, had even heard of the riding accident two months ago that had injured Phelps's spine and kept him in a plaster cast ever since.

"And do you, Laura, take this man. . . ."

The words of the minister reached Dane through a swirling mist. Laura! Laura Hofford—the girl who could have fulfilled all his dreams, was being married to a bed-ridden invalid three times her age! And he, Dane Dustin, could do nothing about it! His name must even go on her marriage certificate as a witness!

"I now pronounce you man and wife."

The words fell like pellets of ice on Dane Dustin's consciousness. His eyes dragged upward to the girl's white face. But she gave no sign of being aware of others in the room. She stood slim and still, almost as if she were stunned. In that moment Dane sensed her frozen numbness of despair.

"Well, that's that." Braden Phelps's satisfied voice broke the moment. "Slim, I reckon you've got a right to kiss the bride."

The girl shrank back as if she'd been struck. Phelps's eyes gleamed with the cruelty of a cat playing with a mouse. Dane Dustin's nails bit into his palms.

"I'd shore like to!" chuckled the tall

evil-looking man at Phelps's side. The next moment he stooped and brushed the girl's check with his lips.

"And now, my other obliging witness—"

"Thanks, I'll waive the privilege," Dane Dustin clipped, and was rewarded by a flash of gratitude from the girl's dark eyes.

"Huh! I have a reputation for paying my debts," Phelps put in coldly. "Since you refuse the time-honored reward, just what do I owe you for your services?"

"You don't owe me anything. But if you should know of a job—"

"I see." Phelps's narrowed eyes swiftly appraised Dane's lean hard length. "How'd you like to ride for me on the Rocking K? Forty and found."

"It's a bargain."

Afterward Dane Dustin wondered about the stricken look which Laura gave him.

ROCKING K range lay on a high tableland, bordered by Green river. The ranch house, a low rambling affair, was set against a background of towering pines. Corrals, sheds and bunkhouse occupied a small cove to the left, with a straight ribbon of drift fence reaching to the far horizons east and west.

There was a haunting quietness about the place, cupped there below the high rim of the hills, a quiet that somehow carried a subtle sinister threat. Dane Dustin felt it, as he traversed the path between bunkhouse and kitchen one morning the second week after his arrival.

Most of the Rocking K outfit were away, camped in the high brakes of upper Green river during round-up. Only Dane, Braden Phelps, and his faithful henchman, Slim Hornaday, remained at the ranch headquarters. And, of course, there was Laura—Laura, quiet and still as a shadow, as she went about her self-imposed duties in the Rocking K ranch house. It was almost as if she purposely buried memory, and even thought, in a multiplicity of household tasks.

Braden Phelps, watching her with narrowed, derisive eyes, talked about the time when he should be well again and she would be his wife in fact as well as name. Laura endured his sly insinuations in white silence, her dark eyes holding a nameless dread.

To Dane Dustin had been assigned the task of looking after the few head of stock that were always kept in the headquarters' corrals. Slim Hornaday's duties were of a different nature, principally that of taking care of Braden Phelps's personal needs—carrying the injured man in strong whip-cord arms from his cot to the ranch-house porch, or even taking him on infrequent trips to Clayville so that Phelps might keep in touch with his banking interests there.

There were times, however, when Slim Hornaday was absent from the Rocking K, riding off alone in the early morning and not returning until hours later. Where he went, or what his business was, seemed to be something known only to himself and Braden Phelps. More than once Dane Dustin had watched Hornaday's departure with narrowed speculative eyes.

Hornaday had gone away this very morning, leaving the bunkhouse before dawn, slipping into the outer dark with a queer halting step, no doubt on some mission for Braden Phelps. Queer, the tie which seemed to bind those two, a tie that had its basis deep in hate. More than once Dane had heard Braden Phelps lashing out at Slim Hornaday in cold-tongued fury. And Hornaday had taken the other's insults in silence, with only his clenched hands and pale flaming eyes revealing the hate he dared not voice. It was almost as if Braden Phelps, even in his helplessness, held some hidden power over the younger man, a power that he wielded with calculated cruelty.

Where would it all end? What would become of all these forces of hate and fear and cruelty which wove their sinister web about the occupants of the Rocking K headquarters ranch? Dane Dustin washed up on the back porch and thought grimly of Laura Phelps —the unnameable terror in her eyes, the almost childish tremor of soft curving lips.

And then all at once the morning quiet was shattered by a sharp inarticulate cry. It came from close at hand, within the ranch-house kitchen.

"Don't! Don't you dare!"

Laura's voice! It seared Dane Dustin like white-hot steel. He flung open the door and stepped in. There, on the other side of the room stood Slim Hornaday with Laura struggling in his arms. Dane Dustin's blue-barreled Colt leaped into his hand.

"Hornaday!"

The man across the room whirled, releasing Laura. "Huh, it's you, is it?"

"Yes, it's me, Slim. And if you ever touch Mrs. Phelps again, you'll get a bullet in your heart!" Dustin's gray eyes bored into those of the other man.

"Plumb loyal to the boss, ain't you?" Hornaday sneered. "Reckon you've got some ambitions yourself, eh?"

In that moment a red mist seemed to swim before Dane Dustin's eyes. His left fist shot out, connecting with Hornaday's chin. The man went down like a felled steer.

"Get up!" rasped Dane, holstering his gun. "Get up and take the whipping you deserve!"

But Slim Hornaday had no intention of matching blows with Dustin. He dragged himself to his feet and slunk out the door, a moment later disappearing down the bunkhouse path with his peculiar halting gait.

"Thank you, Dane."

Laura's soft voice brought Dane slowly about. It was the first time she had ever called him by name and she apparently did so now unconsciously. One small hand reached out to touch his. "You've hurt yourself. Here, let me fix it."

As she bathed his bruised hand in a basin beside the window, Dane stared down at her flushed cheeks and lowered lashes. Her nearness, the gentle touch of her fingers, moved him strangely.

"Why—how—" Dane stopped, unable to voice the question that his whole being clamored to ask.

"You mean," rich crimson dyed Laura's cheeks, "how does it come I'm here, married to Braden Phelps?"

Dane Dustin nodded wordlessly.

"I suppose you've a right to ask." There was a leaden flatness in Laura's voice. "Braden Phelps loaned my father money—a large sum—when Dad was about to lose his ranch. Phelps did it on the promise that I would marry him. And then on the way home with the money, Dad was held up and shot dead. The money was gone and there was nothing for me to do but carry out my part of the bargain."

Silence lay between the man and girl like a living, breathing thing. And then a slow consuming rage welled upward in Dane Dustin's breast. A mad drumming wakened in his ears.

"I—I understand," he choked. A moment later, he turned and plunged blindly out the door.

IN THE following day the big rain started. Hour after hour the leaden skies poured their steady flood over range and upland. Overnight, Green river changed from a placid mountain stream into a raging torrent, sending the dull boom of its waters echoing along the hills. Out on the range, cattle drifted before the storm or sought shelter in protected coves.

Inside the Rocking K ranch house, Braden Phelps railed against the fate which tied him helpless to cot or wheel-chair. Dane heard him shouting orders to Slim Hornaday all during

dinner. Later Hornaday disappeared, riding off alone through gray sheets of rain. Laura moved about the house like a shadow, jumping at the sound of Braden Phelps's commands or silently enduring his sly insults.

"Women are the devil," Phelps confided to Dane Dustin. "Don't ever get married."

A white line appeared along the angle of Dane's jaw. "I don't ever expect to—now," he said quietly.

"Just look at my sweet little wife!" sneered Phelps. "See how her eyes light up with love when she looks at me! Come here, sweetheart, and give your ardent husband a kiss."

But Laura, driven past endurance, turned and fled up the stairs to her room.

Later, when he was riding the north range in search of strays, Dane wondered about that room. A small chaste sanctuary there at the head of the stairs, which none but Laura had entered.

A brisk wind from the higher levels had parted the sodden clouds and let a burst of sunshine through. All around the hills lay brilliant green and glittering with myriad water jewels. Dane, spurring toward a herd of cattle feeding in a distant cove, suddenly slowed to a stop. Around the angle of a forking trail, Laura had appeared. She was mounted on a slim-barreled gray, her crimson sweater making a splash of color against the distant sky. All at once Dane Dustin's heart began a smothered pound.

"I couldn't stand the house any longer," she explained. "The rain's been getting on my nerves. It seems good to have a glimpse of the sun once more."

"I'm afraid it won't last. That sun's too hot—a regular weather breeder. We're due for another shower pronto."

Dane had turned his horse beside hers. Somehow it seemed the most natural thing in the world that the two of them should be riding together. The trail dipped into a narrow ravine, then climbed the farther hill. For the moment Dane had forgotten everything but that Laura was here beside him, that out of all eternity they had this moment alone.

Laura sat her horse as if born to the saddle, her dark eyes brooding on the distant hills. She couldn't know the picture she made—a small silent figure amid the immensity of range and sky. Dane suddenly felt an overwhelming anger at the vagaries of fate, and the cruelty of Braden Phelps.

"I saw Doc Sanders leave the house last night," he spoke through tight lips. "What does he say about Mr. Phelps?"

"Progressing fairly well." The words fell tonelessly from Laura's lips. "It'll be another two weeks before the casts can be removed."

Something like relief dawned in Dane Dustin's eyes. A fresh phalanx of clouds, born on the wings of a freshening wind, had appeared above the horizon. Swiftly they swept toward the zenith, wiping out the blue. As if in answer to Dane's prophecy, rain began to fall.

"We'll have to run for it! There's an opening in that cliff ahead."

Dane spurred forward, Laura following on her swift little gray. As they reached the cliff opening, the skies seemed to open, deluging the earth below. Dane drew both horses beneath the sheltering rock. A blinding flash of lightning illuminated the cave-like place. Thunder crashed along the cliff and reverberated among the hills.

"Don't be afraid," Dane spoke reassuringly. "We're safe for a while at least."

"I'm not afraid—not here," breathed Laura, eyes wide and shining.

Dane looked down at her and a slow stricture caught at his throat. No, she was not afraid. It was only back there in the Rocking K ranch house that fear laid its chill grip on her soul.

Later they explored the outer room of the cave. Bare rock walls reached to a vaulted ceiling lost in gloom. At

the back another opening led to a second chamber.

"Look!" exclaimed Laura, stooping. "A fifty-cent piece! Someone's been here recently. See, it's still bright."

Dane turned the coin in his hand, his mind busy with some hidden thought. "Yes, someone's been here. Mind if I keep this as a—as a souvenir?"

"A souvenir?"

"Of our one ride together," Dane said softly. For a long moment his eyes held hers, while a flush started at the base of Laura's throat and swept upward. Dane suddenly stepped toward her, then stopped, hands clenched at his side. "I reckon we'd better be going back," he said thickly.

They rode in silence along the homeward trail. Yet each was strangely moved, accutely aware of the other. At the corral gate, Laura left him. Dane still sat his horse, with the fifty-cent piece which Laura had found, cupped in one broad palm. Then he drew another matching coin from his pocket and laid it with the first.

"Like as two peas," he whispered, then added grimly: "Two more weeks."

POURING rain continued all night and for the next three days. Green river ran bank full, a sullen murky flood. The low bridge below the Rocking K went out with snapping timbers and rending wood. Leaden skies seemed to lie flat along the rangelands, smothering all in murky mist. Tension in the Rocky K ranch house tightened hourly. Braden Phelps raged like a trapped lobo at the doctor's orders which kept him in his plaster cast. Dane heard him shouting at Slim Hornaday as he came up to breakfast Wednesday morning.

"Get Carley Harris on the phone! Tell him I want him to come out here!"

"Harris says he can't come—the Green river bridge is out." Slim Hornaday's voice held a sullen rebellion.

"I don't care if it is! Tell him to get out here."

"Tell him yourself!" snarled Hornaday. "I'm gettin' tired of your damned orders!"

"Is that so!" snapped Braden Phelps. "Well, you'll take 'em and like 'em, understand?"

"You may give one too many!" Slim Hornaday flung out of the house, his eyes flaming wells of hate. He passed Dane Dustin on the steps, then continued on toward the corrals with his peculiar halting step.

"That you, Dustin?" roared Phelps from his cot in the big living-room.

Dane came to the doorway, regarding his employer with the same repugnance he would accord a rattler.

"Dustin, I want you to ride up on the brakes and tell the rest of the crew to come down. There's no sense of 'em trying to round up stock in this rain. I'll put 'em to work here on the home ranch."

At the corral Dane caught up and saddled a horse. Yet once out the gate, he turned directly north instead of following the trail to the upper Green river brakes. Would Braden Phelps notice the direction he had taken? But that could not be helped. Dane was remembering that letter that lay close in the pocket of his flannel shirt and the instructions it contained. He had a job to finish before the rest of the Rocking K crew returned to back up Braden Phelps.

The rain had abated somewhat, settling down to a steady mist. Dane buttoned his slicker close and drew his Stetson low over keen gray eyes. Along a high ridge he rode, coming at last to the trail forks where he had met Laura two days before. Memory of that brief time alone with her warmed Dane like heady wine. The soft curve of her cheek, the damp curling tendrils of blue-black hair, her gallant courage in face of the storm.

"A lily thrown on a garbage heap!" muttered Dane bitterly.

Afterward he rode in silence, eyes

set grimly on the trail ahead. He came at last to the ravine where he and Laura had taken shelter. Tying his mount in a laurel clump, Dane went forward on foot, treading softly among scattered stones. Twice he stopped to listen, yet there sounded only the steady drip of rain. Two bats flew out of the cave opening with swift shearing wings.

The vaulted ceiling was lost in gloom. Somewhere a draft of air set up an eerie moan. Dane drew a candle from his pocket. Its feeble light made the farther corners seem the darker. Slowly Dane advanced, spurs echoing on hard rock floor. And then he was through the opening and in the inner room. His light fell on a jumble of equipment, small forge, lamps, work bench, forms and stamps and dies.

"So that's the lay! A complete counterfeiting outfit!"

Quickly Dane fitted the coin which Laura had found to one of the forms. In that moment there came a furtive movement from behind.

"Reach, hombre! You're covered!"

Dane whirled. There, not six feet away, stood Slim Hornaday, pale eyes glittering above a leveled sixgun. The candle light threw long shadows across his face, emphasizing hollowed cheeks and high-bridged nose.

"Plumb curious, ain't you?" Hornaday sneered. "Reckon I ought to drill you right now, but I'll let Phelps decide that. Get goin' and see you make no breaks! My trigger finger's mighty light!"

Five minutes later, the two were retracing the homeward trail. Dane rode ahead, with Slim Hornaday's gun trained steadily on his back.

A SENSE of impending tragedy had weighed on Laura's spirit all day. Perhaps it was the incessant pelt of rain or lowering gray of the skies; perhaps it was merely woman's intuition. Laura didn't stop to analyze her feeling, knowing only that a cold fear ate slowly at her heart. It was as if all the forces of hate in this lonely place were at last converging to some definite end.

Swiftly Laura's mind quested back over the past three weeks: Her marriage to Braden Phelps, Slim Hornaday's hot possessive eyes, and Dane Dustin. Out of all the nightmare of those days, Dane Dustin stood like a rock of strength, a rock to which she had no right to cling.

Why was he here? Why had he taken work with a man like Braden Phelps? Her heart dared not guess the answer. More than once she had dreamed of Dane—Dane riding along a rimrock trail, his hard bronzed face whipped by wind and sun, his steady gray eyes plumbing the depths of hers.

Had they met under different circumstances. . . . Yet, even as the thought came to her, Laura resolutely put it away. She was a married woman, married in name only to Braden Phelps. In that moment a growing terror wrapped the girl's heart. All her youth revolted against such a marriage. Marriage should be based on love, not barter! Yet Braden Phelps had bought and paid for her as truly as he would buy and pay for a horse. She had tried to save her father and it had come to this! When Braden Phelps got well. . . . Laura shuddered at the thought.

Pacing the narrow confines of her room, she tried to realize that henceforth this would be her home. No, not home, but a hateful prison from which there was no release but death! And then all at once Laura stopped. Harsh voices were coming from the room below.

"Who are you?" thundered Braden Phelps.

"Dane Dustin, cowhand on the Rocking K."

Laura's hand flew to her throat, her eyes widened in terror.

"He's a Federal dick! That's why he's snoopin' round! That's why. . . ."

The rest of Slim Hornaday's words were lost in the shrill clamor of the

telephone. There was a moment of mumbled conversation, then again Hornaday's words came clear:

"It's Carley Harris, boss. He wants you to come into Clayville pronto."

Phelps spat an oath. "Clayville! With the bridge out?"

"The river's down some. We can cross the ford below. There's something doing at the bank. Reckon Dustin here's sent in a report or two."

Again Phelps swore. "Tie him up! I'll have to go, but there's some things I'll sweat out of him when I get back."

"Phelps, don't go. He'll—"

Dane Dustin's words were cut short. There was the sound of a brief scuffle, then silence. Five minutes later, a buckboard stopped before the porch. And then Hornaday and Phelps were gone, all else apparently forgotten in their hurry to reach Clayville. Laura descended the stairs with flying feet. Dane Dustin lay bound and gagged on the living-room floor. It took but a moment to release him.

"Quick, Laura! We've got to stop them!" Dane turned, plunging toward the door. "Phelps—" His words were whipped away by the wind.

Laura caught up a coat and followed. "Take me with you, Dane! Don't leave me here alone!"

Two horses stood saddled at the corral, the horses Dane and Hornaday had ridden earlier in the afternoon. Laura and Dane followed the river trail, swinging left toward the ford. Already the buckboard was out of sight, the sound of racing hoofs whipped backward by the wind. Dane rode with gray eyes straight ahead, his lips set in a grim unbending line. Rain stung Laura's face, yet she scarcely felt it in her need to keep at Dane Dustin's side. And then they topped a rise and saw the ford a quarter-mile ahead.

Already the buckboard was entering the water, the muddy stream rising quickly to the horses' bellies. Suddenly the two on the hill saw Braden Phelps's blanketed figure lurch sidewise in the seat. The next moment he toppled, head-foremost, into the flood.

"Dane!" gasped Laura, "Hornaday pushed him!"

"Deliberate murder! I was afraid of it! I tried to stop Phelps, to tell him Hornaday would kill him."

"But can't we do something?"

"Too late. That plaster cast will keep him under."

"Look, Dane! Hornaday's coming back!" Stark fear ripped at Laura's voice. "Your gun!

"They took it. Is there another at the house?"

"Only a little short-range revolver that Dad gave me years ago."

"It's better than nothing!" Dane clipped. "Hornaday doesn't intend to stop at one murder. Come!"

They turned their horses, racing full speed along the backward trail. One thought lay uppermost in Dane Dustin's mind: To get Laura back again to the Rocking K ranch house. It was the only protection within the radius of miles. Yet, once there, how could he defend her against Slim Hornaday? The man's dark schemes lay revealed as by a brilliant light. He had deliberately planned the drowning of Phelps, intending to return and put an end to Dustin. Laura, then, would be at his mercy.

Crash! A bullet rocketed past Dane's head. Hornaday had seen them, was even now striving to write that last sinister chapter to his plans.

"Laura, ride ahead of me!" snapped Dane. "We'll at least cut Hornaday's target in half."

"But you—"

"Never mind me! Ride!"

Dane cast a swift glance at the sky. Darkness was already setting in. Just ahead lay the ranch house—and one little short-range revolver against Slim Hornaday's guns.

As soon as they reached the shelter of the house and slammed the door, Laura pressed the revolver into his hand. Dane noticed that her face was paper-white. Yet only courage lay in the depths of her brown velvet eyes.

"Ammunition?" Dane asked cryptically.

"Only what's in it. I haven't used the gun for years, but brought it along when I married him as—as a last resort."

Dane nodded understandingly.

Darkness had fallen outside. Dark, too, was the house, yet neither Dane nor Laura made a move to light a lamp. They stood just inside the living-room door, waiting breathlessly. From the direction of the corral they could hear the sound of wheels, as Slim Hornaday turned in the big gate. And then came a soft step on the gravel path. Dane moved to the window, peering out.

"Dustin, you might as well give up! You don't stand a chance!" called Hornaday.

Dane's gun flamed. Out of the darkness came Hornaday's evil laugh. Missed! Minutes dragged by. Dane, straining every nerve to follow Hornaday's movements, felt Laura stir beside him.

"He's going around to the back," she breathed.

"Quick, Laura! Step over behind the organ. You'll be safe there."

"I'd rather stay by you."

"It'll help me most if I know you're out of line."

Laura moved away. Again silence fell. The ticking of a big wall clock grew till it seemed like thunder in the room. Somewhere a door creaked. Dane Dustin stiffened, taut as a wire. He dared not waste another shot.

Again the minutes ticked away, stretching out to dim eternities. Where was Hornaday? Crash! A streak of flame stabbed the kitchen darkness. Dane sent two quick shots in return, then dived for the floor. Not a split second too soon. A bullet buried itself in the wall above his head. Two more bullets gone. Dane circled the room with cat-like tread. Out through the hall and across the dining-room.

A waiting game it was, a game wherein tightened nerves screamed for release. A cold chill raised the hair at the back of Dane's neck. Each second he expected to feel the impact of a bullet. Again the eternal minutes ticked away, with two men stalking each other like wild beasts through dark and silent rooms.

The big wall clock struck two. Was it possible that so many hours had passed? To Dane came a second and more devastating thought. Dawn would soon lighten the eastern sky, dispersing the darkness that was his and Laura's protection! Somehow, someway, this silent battle must end before that! Outside the rain had ceased, with scudding clouds still obscuring the stars.

Suddenly from across the room came the sound of a clinking spur. Dane's gun jerked up. But only a dull click answered the pressure of his finger. Laura had been mistaken about the number of shells in the gun! Dane's lips settled in a grim line. Henceforth it must be his bare hands against Slim Hornaday's guns.

With dawn a scant half-hour away, something must be done. Even as Dane listened for Hornaday's step, his mind worked with lightning speed. If Hornaday were in the kitchen. . . . Suddenly Dane reached out and sent a chair hurtling across the room. Six shots came rocketing in answer. A groan sounded through the dark.

"Dane! Dane!" cried Laura.

An oath ripped the darkness, followed by the crash of a heavy body on the floor. What followed was almost too swift for words. Gasp of breath, thud of fists on flesh, a wild shot, shattering glass! And then Dane Dustin's voice came clear.

"All right, Laura! I've got him! Bring a light while I make this lobo fast."

A moment later Laura came, carrying a lighted lamp. "Dane, you're hurt!"

"No. That groan was only a ruse to draw Hornaday out of the kitchen." Dane was breathing like a spent runner. "I threw that chair across the doorway, in hopes he'd stumble over it

in the dark. He did, and I got his gun."

Slim Hornaday lay prone on the floor, with hands and feet securely tied. He glared at the two above him with pale malevolent eyes.

"I guess that settles you, Hornaday," Dane said grimly. "Reckon Uncle Sam'll put you where you belong."

"Then—then you are a Federal agent?" Laura's eyes were enormous in the pale oval of her face.

"Yes, Laura. I was fed up following the trigger trail and had handed in my resignation, intending to settle down to ranching over near Grand Ronde. Then a stream of bogus money began seeping out of the Clayville country and the chief pressed me to take this one more case."

"And Braden Phelps?"

"The chief suspected Phelps. And he was right. Hornaday ran the counterfeit plant here on the ranch and Carley Harris, under Phelps's direction, passed the money out through the bank. Hornaday's a convict, an escaped one. That was the hold Phelps had over him. I recognized that peculiar walk of Hornaday's from the first. It's the mark that a prison lock-step leaves on a man." Dane put Hornaday's gun into Laura's hand. "I'll have to take this prisoner into town. Will you be afraid to look after him while I go saddle up fresh horses?"

"No, I'm not afraid. Not ever, any more."

They were standing in the open doorway, with the far stars dimming before encroaching dawn. Dane's gray eyes softened, as he looked down at the slender girl.

"There'll be things to straighten out, you know—some of them unpleasant, Laura. Perhaps you've guessed that Phelps was behind your father's death. And then there's the bank and—"

"But you'll stand by me, Dane?" Her voice was only a whisper but Dane heard.

"Always and forever, dear!"

For a long moment their glances met in complete understanding and love, while the first light of a crystal dawn flung them the promise of a new day.

Beginning in the next issue

You Texan

A Stirring Serial of Love in the West where Adventure Calls

By JAMES W. ROUTH

From Points South

By Eric Howard

Hot lead, slung by a "hellion on wheels," awaited Dan, but the little god of love drew his bow and arrow first.

SLEEK, freshly shaved and well dressed, the boss of Verde leaned on the bar and studied the range-stained stranger at his side. As the latter glanced at him out of clear gray eyes, the boss smiled. The stranger noted that although his lips moved, his eyes did not lose their steady gleam. The smile was automatic and meant to be disarming.

"Son," said the boss, fingering his cigar, "you look like a man that's been places and done things. You look like a man with sand in his craw and gumption in his get-up. You want a job?"

"I want to pay for the meal and drink you bought me," said the stranger. "I needed 'em bad. Name your job, mister. If it ain't agin the law, I'm your man."

"Agin the law?" laughed Jig Drew. "It's with the law, feller. That's my side of the fence, always. Come over here and I'll tell you. Bring your bottle along."

They sat down at a table on the far side of the room, against the wall. Jig Drew, boss of Verde, and a tall, weather-beaten, tight-lipped young stranger from —well, points south, he had said. He had come into Verde, from across the desert, two hours before, and had almost fallen when he entered the saloon.

Jig Drew had seen, at once, that he was far gone from hunger and thirst.

Always an opportunist, and in his way generous, Drew had given him water, a little at a time, had bought him a meal, and had set up a few drinks. This man, with his gaunt cheeks, his grim lips, his fearless eyes, might prove useful. And Jig Drew could use him. His name, he had said, was Dan Carmichael. But a stranger who came, vaguely, "from points south," might have picked up a name on the way.

Jig took a piece of paper from his pocket, wet a pencil with his tongue and proceeded to sketch a crude map. The stranger poured a drink and sipped it.

"Here we are in Verde," said Jig, thrusting the map across the table and pointing with the pencil. "That cross right there is Verde. Here's the road up to Goldcamp, where there ain't any gold. And here, as you turn off that road, ten miles out of town, is the branch that goes to Bison Mesa and the ranches out that way. See?"

The stranger nodded. "Plain as daylight. So?"

"Here's a ranch I own," Jig sketched in a square, "and up here, where Bison Canyon cuts into the mesa, is where this gang of rustlers and cutthroats are holed up."

"What gang?" asked the stranger.

"The Meadows gang, I reckon," said Jig. "They operated in here ten years ago. Now some of 'em are back again. I been losin' cattle. One of my men was killed. Other ranches have suffered, too. I want 'em wiped out, captured, or anyway scared out of the country."

"You got lawmen, haven't you?"

"Not here. The sheriff's office is 'way over at Goldcamp, the other end of the county. I'm a deputy myself, and I'm supposed to keep law and order over here. But I'm busy. I can't leave things here in Verde to chase down a gang of rustlers. The men I've sent haven't got anywhere—one was killed, two was wounded, and the others are scared out. That's why I'm talkin' to you, stranger. There's a big stake in it, if you want to tackle it. I took you for a man that wouldn't be afraid to try. Was I wrong?"

Jig leaned forward, smiling confidently. The stranger's eyes met his calmly. Young Carmichael slowly smiled.

"Mebbe I'm afraid," he said, "but I'll try anyway. You're givin' me the straight of this, mister? It's a bad gang you're sendin' me up against and I've got the law's backin'?"

Jig gestured expansively. "Haven't I laid all my cards on the table?" he demanded. "Ask anybody in Verde if my word's good. I've got the right to deputize you, and I'll do it. I'll pay you good wages, and if you put a stop to the depredations of that gang it'll be worth plenty. How's that?"

"Thanks for the chance to earn wages and pay you for the meal and the drinks," said Carmichael. "I'm your man. I'll sleep on it and light out in the mornin', if that's agreeable. My hoss is plumb wore out, though."

"I'll supply a horse, all the chuck you can tote, whatever you need, includin' ammunition. You'll find a bed upstairs, Carmichael. Fall in it." Jig laughed. "Take another bottle up with you, if you want it."

"Had plenty," said Carmichael, rising.

"'Most forgot to mention it, son," Jig called after him, "there's reported to be a gal with that gang up there—a reg'lar little hellion on wheels. I figger you for a man that wouldn't want to fight women, even her kind."

"I wouldn't, no," Carmichael said slowly. "She runs with the Meadows gang?"

"May lead it, for all I know," Jig shrugged. "She's the one that killed my man."

"I'll try to stay out of her way."

LATE the next day, as the sun was disappearing over the rim of Bison Mesa, a gaunt-cheeked, tight-lipped young stranger, mounted on a horse that bore

Jig Drew's brand and wearing a star Jig had pinned on him, rode into the domain long dominated by old Bill Bradley, now operated by his daughter, Billie.

Carmichael was an officer of the law. He was looking for rustlers. Specifically, he was looking for the Meadows gang. He had heard of them. It was not strange that they had gathered again, when some of them got out of jail, and had returned to their old stamping ground. Jig Drew's story rang true and held water.

Carmichael had a job on his hands, and he knew it. He advanced warily, watching intently for any sign of life. He was up against a gang of bad hombres. He was taking a long chance. Well, he had taken them before. Of late, he had had a run of hard luck, which accounted for his appearance in Verde, from points south, weak and weary and travel-stained.

A rifle cracked!

Carmichael swung low in the saddle, swerved the horse into a chaparral thicket and came to a sudden stop.

He peered at the slope above him, watching for the rifleman's movement. Presently he saw a moving blob of color against the green hillside. His hand dropped to his sixgun. But he waited.

A voice floated down to him.

"Turn round and go back! You know better'n to come up here. I told Drew I'd kill the next man he sent. I shoulda killed you, but I'm givin' you this chance. Head back to Verde where Drew and all his killers belong. This range is too clean for men like you!"

It was a young voice, clear and vibrant, but also strong and bitter. Carmichael judged the speaker to be a boy of sixteen or so.

He said nothing. As the sun sank, the rifleman was in the light, plainly visible now that he had found him, while Carmichael was in shadow. Carmichael left his horse and ran down to a shallow draw, a few feet below. Following this, he circled around the slope, edging up toward the rifleman.

"Get goin'!" the speaker said again. "Light out before dark or I'll have to drop you. I can't risk lettin' you fire any more of my hay or poison any more cattle. Get goin' now!"

He saw the rifle come up. It was aimed at the clump of brush where he had left his horse.

But now Carmichael was above and behind the speaker, moving as swiftly and silently as an Indian. Suddenly he leaped forward, flung his arms around the speaker, and flung him to the ground.

As the other released the rifle, Carmichael seized it and at the same time drew his Colt.

Then, in open-mouthed amazement and with a widening of his gray eyes, he stared down at his captive.

It was a girl, with bright yellow hair that fell to her shoulders in a golden ripple now that her hat was off. It was a girl with indignant blue eyes.

"I'll be darned," said Carmichael mildly, considering his surprise. "You sure talk almost like a growed-up man. I took you for a boy of sixteen or so. You always talk that way?"

"No, I—I don't!" the girl stammered, and her voice was much sweeter and softer than it had been. "I wish I'd killed you!"

"I reckon you do. You one of the Meadows gang?"

She looked at him, puzzled. "The what?" she asked.

"There's a gang of rustlers up this way. I heard they had a young gal hellion along with 'em. Some say she's killed a man already. The Meadows gang. I thought mebbe you might be the gal, the way you wanted to kill me."

She got to her feet and brushed the dust from her clothes.

"The Meadows gang hasn't been near here for ten years and you know it, just as Drew knows it. My dad drove 'em out of the country, those he didn't kill. Everybody knows that. What are you talking about?"

"Heard they come back," said Carmichael mildly. "They didn't? Then

who's doin' the rustlin' I've heard about?"

In spite of his gun, she advanced with cheeks flaming and fists clenched.

"Drew! Drew! Drew!" she cried. "Drew and all you rotten hirelings who do his dirty work for him!" She flung her head up. "Now what are you going to do with me?" she demanded.

"I don't know," said Carmichael. "I feel like applaudin' and askin' you to go on with the show. Right now I'm kind o' mixed up in my head. Drew sent me up here to clean up the Meadows gang, includin' a young lady hellion which killed a man. And you say there ain't no Meadows gang and Drew's the big bad hombre round here. What's a poor dumb cowboy, far from home, to think?"

The girl's bitter indignation passed. She stared at him for a long time, sizing him up, looking into his gray eyes. Then she laughed.

"Drew told you all that?" she asked. "What for, I wonder?"

"I'm doin' a little wonderin' myself," said Carmichael. "I was taught never to doubt a lady's word, and I'd hate to doubt yours. But you see where I am —one says one thing, one another."

"Meaning you'd like to know what's what? The truth?"

"It would help some. Let me tell you why I'm here. I'll take a chance that you ain't a member of this Meadows gang, with a dozen men in these hills waitin' for your order to drill me." He told her then, quickly and simply, of his arrival in Verde, of Drew's friendliness, of his offer of a job and his own acceptance. "And he sent me right up here," he continued, "tellin' me to watch out for the Meadows bunch."

The girl had listened carefully, studying the man before her, convinced of the truth of his speech, in spite of all she knew of Drew and his knavery. Convinced, perhaps, by the clear honesty of Carmichael's gaze, the calm sincerity of his tone.

"I think I see," she said when he had finished. "He sent you here to get killed or to kill me. If I hadn't shot over your head, he'd be able to arrest me for murder. He's accused me of killing a man, he's talked against me in Verde, all through the country. But he had no real evidence. He thought I'd kill you—I promised to shoot the next man he sent—or you'd kill me. Either way, he'd be pleased."

"Why?"

"Why?" The girl smiled bitterly. "Because I stand in his way, because I won't sell out and I won't leave, because burning my hay and poisoning my stock haven't stopped me."

Carmichael looked at her. "Tell me some more," he said. "Just who are you?"

"I'm the hell-cat he told you about," she smiled, "but there's no Meadows gang. I'm Billie Bradley and this is my ranch. This is the line I'm guarding against Drew and his men."

"Alone?"

"Alone, except for my five punchers—three of them pretty old, two of them just boys. It's all they can do to look after the beef. It's up to me to stop Drew—or anybody."

Carmichael had holstered his gun. He rested the rifle on the ground.

"Looks like I was took in," he said. "I needed a job and I took Drew at his word. Reckon you're right. He aimed to get me shot and arrest you for murder. Me wearin' a badge, it would go worse with you. Why didn't you aim at me?"

"I couldn't kill a man, not even Drew," she said.

"That other one—you didn't kill him?"

She shook her head. "I think it was Drew himself who shot him. We found him here after my men had a skirmish with some of Drew's."

Carmichael handed her the rifle.

"You believe me, then?" she asked.

He smiled. "Sure. You don't look like a hell-cat to me. You look kind of sweet and gentle, 'cept when you're plumb mad. And you're dead game, to be buckin' the boss of Verde."

Billie flushed and turned away.

"I'll be riding to the house," she said. "I'll send one of the boys out, in case Drew comes again or sends anyone else. Good-by, cowboy."

"Wait! I'll be seein' you again, after I hand my badge back to Drew and tell him he lied to me. My name's Dan Carmichael and I want you to know—"

Whatever it was he wanted her to know was left unsaid, for from the gathering darkness three men appeared. One of them thrust a gun into Dan's back, as Billie cried a warning. For an instant Carmichael was guilty of believing the girl had tricked him after all. Then, turning his head slightly, he saw Jig Drew.

The girl ran down the slope.

"You two got friendly in no time at all," said Drew unpleasantly. "I expected somethin' else."

"You expected I'd get shot," remarked Carmichael, "and you could charge her with killin' a lawman. Or you thought mebbe I'd shoot her and get her out of your way. It didn't work out, Drew. I'm holdin' your lies against you."

"Hold and be damned, tramp," said Drew. "I fed and watered you. I hired your to do a job. If you'd been the man I took you for, you'd 'a' done it."

"I don't shoot till I know who I'm shootin'."

"You won't get a chance, again. Throw the hemp on him, boys. I aim to take him right up in the Bradley front yard and leave him there. There's no way to handle that hell-cat but to jail her."

A rope settled over Dan's arms, cut into his flesh. His gun was jerked out of the holster. He had heard the pounding hoofbeats of Billie's horse as she rode away, and he was glad she had fled.

"Catch up his horse and we'll ride," said Drew.

"Why you aim to drive this girl out of here?" Carmichael inquired.

"She's in my way!" snapped Drew. "I give her a chance to sell out or to leave peaceful. But no, she allowed she'd fight. As ornery as her old man. She's gettin' her fight."

Soon they were riding in the direction Billie had taken, toward the ranch house, presumably. Carmichael's mind seethed. He knew now that he should have suspected Jig Drew; he had sensed something false in the man. But if he had suspected him and had turned down his offer, he would never have met Billie Bradley. No, he was glad he was here, even though bound and helpless. He might be able. . . .

One of Drew's companions was speaking in a low, guarded tone. Carmichael listened.

"She's got four, five men there," the man said. "And there's only three of us."

Drew spat. "Two of 'em are workin' for me. They'll stop the others. Just look out for the hell-cat herself."

Carmichael frowned. The girl certainly was up against it, when Drew had even bribed two of her men.

"I sure wish I could help her," he thought, "but I'm kind of up against it myself."

CARMICHAEL was surprised by his first glimpse of the Bradley ranch house. Old Bill Bradley had built well. The long, low building was made of squared timbers, chinked with plaster. Across the front was a deep, shaded porch, the roof supported by huge pine logs. Ivy grew over the porch, and in the yard there was a huge oak tree and several cottonwoods.

There was no one in sight.

Carmichael heard Billie call to the men in the bunkhouse, a white-washed building that stood out in the moonlight. But there was no response from those men.

Drew chuckled. "Ride over there and see if my two boys have got the others stopped," he said to one of his companions.

"Yeah," the man reported presently.

"The gal told 'em you was comin'. We don't have to worry about them any."

"Good," said Drew. "Hold this feller while I talk to her."

He dismounted and swaggered up to the door. He pounded on it. Carmichael, seething with anger, sat his horse between the other two men. Drew had promised to leave him here. Dead, he assumed. Then he would arrest Billie Bradley for murder. Her loyal punchers, in the bunkhouse, would see nothing, would not be able to testify for her. The others would swear she had shot him, a lawman, when he came to arrest her for rustling.

"Hell!" Carmichael muttered under his breath. "A man might as well die tryin'."

He touched the horse's flanks with his spurs. The horse swerved against one of the others. Its rider cursed, threatening Carmichael. The third man crowded close to them, with an oath. Carmichael drove his spurs home. His horse leaped forward. The other two crashed together, shoulder to shoulder, jarring their riders.

Leaning low, Carmichael was around the corner of the house before they started hurling lead. Then he heard Drew's shouts and commands as the boss of Verde ran across the porch.

At the rear of the house, Carmichael pitched from the saddle and landed on his shoulder, lying still. The horse streaked across the flat. Drew's two men pursued, shooting. Drew bellowed at them.

When Drew went back to the front door, Carmichael got up and advanced swiftly toward a door at the rear of the house. Although his hands and arms were bound, he felt far from helpless at this moment.

He struck the door with his shoulder and it crashed open. He kicked it shut as someone screamed. Turning, expecting to see Billie, he saw a gray-haired woman with a rifle across her sturdy knees.

"Don't shoot, ma'am," said Carmichael. "I ain't armed. I'll be obliged if you'll slash this rope and let me grab Jig Drew by the neck."

"Oh! You're the man Billie met out there?"

"I reckon. And you?"

"I'm Billie's aunt. Why don't the boys help us?"

She put down the rifle and got a knife from a drawer. Unquestioningly she cut the rope. Carmichael flexed his muscles.

"Drew bribed a couple of your men," he said. "They're holdin' the other three in the bunkhouse. Drew's men are chasin' me—my horse, I mean. Got a six-gun handy, ma'am? I want to use it on Drew."

From another drawer she took out a Colt forty-five. Carmichael glanced at it and saw that it was loaded.

"You better stay here and guard this door with your rifle," he smiled. "Next time anybody crashes in, shoot!"

"I couldn't," she shook her head. "I just couldn't. Oh, please, help Billie!"

Carmichael moved out of the kitchen, through a large dining-room, toward the front of the house. In the living-room, there was a lighted lamp on the mantel. As he entered, Billie Bradley swung around, the gun in her hand leveled at him.

"Oh!" she cried. "You got away?"

Carmichael grinned at her, gesturing for silence. "What's he want?" he whispered, pointing to the door.

"Says he wants to make me a reasonable offer," she replied. "Says I can't do anything but take it."

"Let him in and let's hear what he has to say. I'll be right over here." He moved toward a large easy chair, knelt down behind it.

Again Drew pounded on the door.

"I don't want any more trouble," he shouted. "I'm willin' to make you a fair offer and if you have any sense you'll take it. Otherwise. . . ."

Billie advanced to the door and opened it. She held her gun at her side.

"Come in, then, and let's hear your offer," she said.

Drew swaggered in. "I'll buy your

spread for a fair price—not as much as I offered you before, but a fair price. You must see by now you can't run this outfit the way your father did. And I even had him on the run," he boasted.

"Why do you want the ranch? Why do you want it so much that you stop at nothing, even murder, in your attempt to get it?"

Drew's eyes narrowed. "Plenty of reason. I want it for what I can do with it. Combined with my own spread I'll make it the biggest in the State. But there's more'n that. I come back here to get your father for what he did to my uncle. I had him on the run when he died on me. I got nothin' agin you, but you're his kin, and I want this ranch!"

"Your uncle?"

"My uncle, Jeff Meadows!"

Billie stepped back. "My father killed him, yes," she said, "but it was a fair fight. Meadows was a killer and a rustler. He deserved what he got. I'm not giving up, Drew. I'll fight you as Dad fought the Meadows gang."

"Then you'll go to jail on a murder charge!" he snapped. "I'm the law in Verde."

"I reckon not," put in Carmichael, rising. "Don't go for your gun, Drew. You sent me to get the Meadows gang. You seem to be it. Step up, with your hands in front of you. I'll use those handcuffs on you."

Astonishment was written large on Jig Drew's usually expressionless face at the appearance and the words of the stranger from points south. He glanced slowly from Carmichael to Billie. He shrugged and thrust out his hands, walking toward Carmichael.

The latter slipped Drew's gun from the holster and tossed it into the chair. He reached for the handcuffs that were attached to Drew's belt. As Carmichael tried to unsnap them, standing quite close to Drew, the gun in his hand wavered slightly. Drew suddenly flung his arms around him, pinning his arms to his sides, and struck Carmichael's chin with his head. Carmichael twisted in his bear grip and drove short jabs to Drew's middle. But Drew held on, butting Carmichael's chin again and again, forcing him back toward the fireplace.

Billie heard hoofbeats outside and knew that the men who had pursued Carmichael were returning. She tried to club Drew with her gun, but just then the men whirled and she almost struck Carmichael instead. A second later, they crashed down, with Carmichael beneath, on the stone hearth. Carmichael lay still. Billie swung her gun on Drew as he wrenched the Colt from Carmichael's fingers.

"Drop it, sister!" came a hoarse voice from the door, and she saw that Drew's two men were in the room.

Drew's fist struck Billie on the arm, and she released her gun. She was staring at Carmichael, hopelessly, and she saw a thin trickle of blood from a scalp wound stain the gray stone of the hearth. He had struck his head as he fell.

"We'll go ahead as we planned," said Drew. "This gal won't listen to reason. Mebbe she will when she's in the pen. She's too pretty to hang, but twenty-five years for manslaughter will fix her. Shoot this feller with her gun."

As one of the men, with a leer, stepped forward to pick up the weapon, Billie flung herself down beside Carmichael.

"No, no!" she protested. "You can't do this, Drew! I'll—I'll agree to what you want. It isn't myself, but I can't let you shoot a man just because he tried to help me. I'd rather lose the ranch."

Drew smiled triumphantly. "Kind of like him, don't you? I didn't figger, when I sent him out here, you'd fall for him. I counted on your shootin' him down."

"I wish I'd shot you long ago!" she gasped. "But if you'll let him go, unharmed, I'll agree to sell."

"Aw, let's kill him!" growled one of the men. "Have to, anyway, sooner or later. He won't go away, and if he does he'll be back. Let me shoot him now."

As the killer raised his gun, Billie shielded Carmichael with her body.

"I'll sell to you—at your own price," she told Drew.

Her pleading voice had reached her aunt, in the kitchen, and for several moments the old woman fought a battle between fear and daring. At last, rifle in hand, she tiptoed through the dining-room and peered into the living-room. What she saw and heard aroused resentful anger.

"Get out of this house, you filthy dogs!" she cried, and started shooting, wildly, blindly, at the two men near the door.

"Aunt Mary!" cried Billie.

One of the men yelled and dashed for the door, falling on the porch. The other crouched down behind a chair. But a bullet found him and he sank there, still.

"Give me—gun!" Carmichael whispered, close to Billie's ear.

She thrust the gun she had dropped into his hand, as Drew, retreating, fear in his eyes, leveled his weapon at Aunt Mary.

Carmichael fired from the floor. The bullet struck Drew's forehead, grazed his scalp. Then, as he staggered, another rifle ball tore through his heart.

A second later, gazing at what she had done, Aunt Mary flung the rifle from her and fell to the floor in a faint.

Carmichael struggled up, swayed a little, then moved across the room to pick up the rifle.

"Heard what you said to him," he observed. "Reckon you saved my life." With rifle in one hand, sixgun in the other, he moved toward the door. "Got to see about them two in the bunkhouse that Drew bribed, and then free the others."

While Billie pressed a drink of cold water to Aunt Mary's lips, Carmichael shouted in the direction of the bunkhouse.

"Three dead men in here," he informed the others. "If you want to live, you two that sold out to Drew come walkin' out, with your hands high and without your guns. You other boys follow."

For a time there was only mocking silence from the bunkhouse. Then, having considered the state of affairs, two punchers—one a shame-faced old man, the other a defiant youngster—marched out with their hands high.

"We ain't done nothin'," said the younger man. "Drew jest asked us to hold these fellers so nobody'd get hurt. You can't blame us for that."

"We'll see," said Carmichael. "Anyway, you're under arrest. I'm a deputy sheriff, duly appointed by Mr. Drew hisself, and I'm takin' you into 'Verde, along with Drew and his pards." The three loyal punchers had walked out of the bunkhouse. "I'm askin' one of you to ride ahead into Verde, to spread the word Drew is dead and through and for any friends of his to get goin'. And I'm askin' another to head for Goldcamp and tell the sheriff—well, tell him the feller he sent for has done arrived. He'll know who you mean. Now, I'll ask you to hitch up a wagon, so's I can take these jaspers to town."

One of the loyal punchers stepped up to him and looked at him for a long moment.

"I know you, boy," he said. "You're Dangerous Dan—used to be a ranger and marshal over Tularosa way. Good work you done here."

"It wasn't me," said Dan. "It was Aunt Mary."

When the team had been hitched to the wagon, and the wagon loaded with its grim freight, Billie came out of the house.

"You aren't going alone into Verde?"

Carmichael nodded. "As deputy sheriff, I've got to take charge and stop anybody that aims to succeed Drew, until the sheriff shows up."

"But—"

She looked around. It was impossible to talk to Dan Carmichael, to speak as she felt like speaking, with the others present. Especially with the two shame-faced men who had sold out to Drew staring at her.

"Looks to me, Dangerous," said the man who had spoken before, "like Miss Billie has things to say. I'll hold a gun on them two, gladly, if you want."

Billie caught his hand and led him up to the ivy-covered porch.

"Dan," she said, then paused. "He called you Dangerous. Did he know you?"

Carmichael laughed.

"Just a name that was hung on me, down south. Dangerous Dan Carmichael. Funny, considerin' how harmless I was when Drew tackled me. Hadn't been for your aunt. . . ."

"Dan, I'm afraid! If you go into Verde, Drew's men will shoot you down."

"Shucks, they're on the run now, I'll bet. The sheriff'll get there soon enough. He sent for me, wantin' me to help clean up Verde. I was headin' for Goldcamp, but things happened and I wound up at Verde. Bad as Drew was, I'll always be grateful to him. He sent me out here to you."

"But you're going away."

"I'm comin' back—to get acquainted."

Suddenly he held her in his arms, and there in the cool shelter of the porch her lips were unhesitatingly lifted to his. He kissed her quickly. Then, as though afraid he had been too bold, he released her and ran down to the wagon.

"Come back soon, Dan dear!" she called softly.

"The minute the sheriff relieves me, I'll be ridin' back to you," Carmichael called from the wagon seat.

As the wagon rolled away, his words sang themselves to Billie, to the creak of the turning wheels.

"I'll be ridin' back to you! I'll be ridin' back to you!"

But it was more than a song. It was a promise. She turned, radiant and starry-eyed, and went indoors, to assure her Aunt Mary that the fight was over, that a young stranger, gaunt of cheek and true of eye, had ridden "from points south" to help them, that he would soon return—to stay!

"I reckon 'way out here you do kind of miss the tall buildings."

AFTER the close of the Civil War, Texas, in common with other Southern states, was placed under military rule. Colonel Badger was detailed to Austin, the State capitol, in command of a regiment of cavalry.

Austin was the home bailiwick of Ben Thompson. And for some years previously, Ben had reserved for himself the exclusive responsibility of keeping the Austin citizenry with one eye on the nearest cyclone cellar. And Ben was the kind of guy who could be depended upon to protest any interference in his arrangement. Consequently Ben's admirers and quite a few folks who would have admired him more were he equipped with six silver handles, were predicting that sooner or later the Colonel was going to have a large consignment of unpleasantness to dispose of at a bargain.

The Colonel camped on the edge of town and appointed a "carpet-bag" marshal to enforce law and order in his new command. In common with other misguided officers before and after him, the new marshal decided to start off his official career with a bang by halter-breaking Ben Thompson. He had a warrant issued for Ben's arrest. Then he went downtown, and, after taking a few doses of Dr. Hennessey's Three Star Aid to Articulation, he announced to all and sundry that he was going to harvest Ben's rattles.

Ben was at home playing with his new son when a friend dropped in and informed him of the new marshal's program. Ben handed the baby over to the mother and reached for his hat and social credentials. He started for town

More of the colorful career of the old-time gunman, Ben Thompson, who was sent to jail for the only shot he ever missed.

By Carl Pyne

Ben Thompson's French Interlude

to explain to the marshal that the law officer's present course was apt to ruin his career. On his way he stopped in at Dad Wahrenberg's and shipped a cargo of Dad's distilled gun cotton. Then he put off for his interview with the marshal.

The marshal saw Ben first and recognized the storm signals. He grabbed his gun and began to blaze away. As a matter of precaution he also dived for an alley at the same time. Not being a wizard with a six-shooter, he made another mistake in dividing his effort. He should have concentrated on his footwork. Ben got in one shot and the job of enforcing law and order in Austin was open for applications.

He went next to the marshal's office where he found the warrant for his arrest and tore it up. With that attended to he proceeded to put on one of his typical one-man riots. He roared up and down Capitol Avenue, closed up business and drove everyone indoors. Then he laid down to cool off.

The Colonel had campaigned in Louisiana at the same time Ben had been over there with the Scouts, and still retained some painful memories of the wreckage that had been scattered around when the Austin maverick had got his tail up and his head down and started to do things to the Union army. Since coming to Austin he had also heard other stories of Ben's eccentricities. Consequently, when a breathless citizen rushed into his office with the news that Ben was on the prod again, he detailed half his regiment to bring the rowdy in.

They found Ben sound asleep on a cot in the office of Miller's livery stable. Before he roused up sufficiently to realize that someone had dared to violate his person, his gross weight had been reduced by two howitzers and he was being convoyed to the local *juzgado* by a battalion of Yankee cavalry.

Ben was awarded the best cell in the city jail—from the point of impregnability. He was festooned with numer-

ous yards of new chain, his feet were shackled to the floor, his hands to the bars, and a guard mounted over him day and night.

The casual observer would no doubt have prophesied a protracted hiatus in Ben's temperamental outbursts. And in all probability the prophecy would have been fulfilled only for the disrupting influence of General Tomas Mexia.

General Mexia was in command of two thousand French troops at Matamoras, just across the Rio Grande from Brownsville. This was during the era of Emperor Maximilian in Mexico. The General had experienced small difficulty in overcoming the organized resistance of the anti-Imperialists. But in routing them out from Matamoras he had only converted them into bandits and guerillas and driven them out into the brush which was already overpopulated with gentry of that persuasion. By preying on his communications, ambushing scouting parties and indulging in other annoying practices, they made his occupation of Matamoras about as comfortable as sleeping with a porcupine. His French troops were ideal flock shooters but, for brush work, they left several things to be desired.

The General was already recruiting a contingent of ex-rebs who preferred the French army to reconstruction. To meet the bandit problem, he hit upon the scheme of organizing a detachment of Texas brushpoppers, men who understood and loved every phase and angle of the gentle art of bushwhacking. Among the men who volunteered for this work was Bill Thompson, Ben's younger brother who, in spite of assiduous efforts, never quite attained Ben's proportions as a major disturbance. The organization also included several of Ben's cronies who for reasons of their own were showing a preference for the climate and society south of the Bravo.

In due time word reached them of the inconvenience which Ben had encountered in Austin. Whatever of good or bad may have been chalked up against their score, they were a breed whose loyalty has never been questioned. They immediately got their heads together in a scheme to restore Ben to circulation.

Their first move was to sell General Mexia the idea that Ben was the only man south of the Arctic Circle who was capable of effectively commanding his bandit exterminators. With this accomplished the rest was merely routine work. They thoroughly understood the potency of "golden balm" in treating injured dignity. Even the dignity of martial law. And General Mexia was not inclined to be penurious.

Bill Thompson arrived in Austin one dark night, his pockets filled with French gold. The following Sunday Ben's guard was removed. That night he moulted his shackles in a manner that was Houdini's major ambition. Iron doors opened magically at his touch. Behind the jail he found a saddled horse. Hanging from the saddle horn were two cartridge-studded belts. In the holsters nestled two long-barreled pistols. By daylight he was half-way to San Antonio. Five days later he rode into Matamoras and was commissioned a captain of his fellow Texans.

By removing thorns from the path of Empire, Ben amply justified the investment. He went at the job with vigor and enthusiasm. In a short time the citizens of Matamoras could kick a bush without expecting to jump a bandit out of it. But that gave rise to another complication. If a man were in trouble he couldn't find a better man than Ben to remedy the situation. If he weren't in trouble, Ben would remedy that situation too.

WHEN the French occupied Matamoras they instituted an extensive system of civic improvements. Among other things was the finest opera house between Mexico City and New York. The new Teatro Nacional was officially opened on Christmas Eve with a grand func-

tion and all the notables in attendance. But, in making out the invitations, Ben and his Texans were completely overlooked.

It was not that Ben was devoid of the necessary social graces. Sober, he could be a credit to any gathering. Between battles, riots and general upheavals, Ben Thompson was a newspaper man and a good one. In this capacity he had attended scores of state functions at Austin where he had met and mingled on terms of equality with governors and other dignitaries both state and national. In his mellow moods he habitually sought to associate with the most cultured element. He was fastidious in his personal appearance, courteous and generous, even gentle when not imbibing.

Ben himself was not greatly concerned over the contortions of the social set. But some of his men were inclined to regard the apparent slight as a deliberate snub to their leader. In short, they were peeved.

They were proud of their leader, as well they might be. Ben Thompson was one of the deadliest of all Western man-killers, yet the record of his killings was perhaps the cleanest ever claimed for a Frontier desperado. He had fought in every conceivable way that fights were fought. And from that day in New Orleans, when as a mere boy he had allowed himself to be locked in a dark room with Emil le Tour, each armed with a Bowie knife, and had come out alone ten minutes later, he had never lost a fight. Nor had he ever won a one-sided one. There was not a blemish on his record as a man-killer. He had killed men right and left, but he had never killed a man who was not armed and facing him—a record he maintained until that night in Jack Harris' Theater nearly twenty years later when the blast of a hidden gunman ended his turbulent career.

Ben laughed off the affair at the Teatro Nacional, and attempted to smooth the ruffled feathers of his bellicose brood. However, the night of the ball Ben and Tom Gilly left camp shortly after dark and rode up to the plaza where a number of fandangos were in progress. Ben started drinking, and it wasn't long before he was organized to the point where his soul was longing for action. And whenever Ben Thompson arrived at that interesting stage he was no neighborhood for non-combatants.

By the time they had broken up several dances the party at the plaza began to grow stale. Then Ben recalled the affair at the theater. True, they had no invitations, but when the hell did a Texan ever have to be invited to a fight or a frolic?

Enroute they encountered a stray dignitary in a carriage to whom Ben "traded" his campaign sombrero for a stove-pipe hat and a claw-hammer coat. After which "the fellow in the back seat—some sort of a foreigner—had the horses put into a gallop."

Now thoroughly infused with a spirit of hilarity, Ben hit upon an innovation which he felt sure would impress the Matamoras social elect. In fact Ben's innovations always left an impression—of some sort.

Taking his Bowie knife, he shoved the point through the top of his hat until it protruded about two inches. Gaining admission while the ball was in full blast, Ben proceeded to pick out the most solemn and imposing figures present and introduce himself to them. As he would bend over in a bow of exaggerated courtliness, Ben would apparently lose his balance and lunge forward. His score of undignified yelps was practically perfect.

Before long Ben had the undivided attention of everybody present including a platoon of police which had been hastily summoned. Ben continued his rounds, bowing and lunging, and having an uproarious time. Meantime the police warily scouted the region of his hips, on which, of course, was no gun. Convinced that he was non-explosive, the police captain, Sixto Garcia, buried the muzzle of his gun in Ben's floating

ribs, other police grabbed his arms and he was unceremoniously hustled outside.

There are several versions of what happened in the dimly lighted street outside. According to one story, Ben didn't move spryly enough and one of the police hit him over the head with a pistol. Another account has it that one of his captors taunted him about his reputed prowess and then committed the indiscretion of emphasizing his contempt by spitting in Ben's face. But, whatever it was they did, it was the wrong thing to do.

Ben, minus his silk topper, his black eyes snapping, drew himself up and crossed his arms. Then, with the speed of a whip lash, his right hand darted to the trick holster under his left arm-pit. As the gun emerged it was spitting a stream of flame and lead. Chief Garcia sprawled grotesquely across the wooden sidewalk, a bullet between his eyes. One of his men pitched across the twitching form, mortally wounded. The others developed a sudden desire to turn the nearest corner in the least time possible. They fired a few impromptu shots as they departed, but their main efforts were in another direction.

During the mêlée Ben slipped and fell. Tom Gilly some distance away seeing Ben fall, thought he had been killed. He commandeered a passing carriage and made for camp as fast as the horses could run. "The Mexican cops have killed Cap'n Ben," he roared up and down the sleeping camp and the camp came to life.

"They tumbled from their bunks and pallets . . . . without putting on any pants or clothes. . . . Their shirt tails flapping and their white drawers showing, they were an odd sight as they mounted their horses. Someone shouted 'don't let a —— one of them pepper-bellied cops get away.'"

Arriving at the plaza, they scattered in every direction, methodically killing every policeman they laid eyes on. So swiftly and quietly had they acted that they had practically exterminated the local guardians of law and order before anyone realized what was going on.

Meanwhile their temperamental leader was several blocks away, staging a typical Ben Thompson show. He was eventually found by one of his men who was looking for any stray police who might have escaped the general massacre. Upon learning the news Ben sobered up sufficiently to round up his men and assure them that the report of his late demise was a trifle premature. But not before sixteen police had been killed. The Texans dismissed the affair as a not too regrettable error and went back to camp and their interrupted sleep.

General Mexia convened a court of inquiry the next day to make an investigation. But before any evidence was taken the members of the court were waited upon by a delegation which informed them that in case any punitive measures were recommended, the entire ex-Confederate contingent would personally attend to reversing the verdict. As there were several hundred of these in addition to Cap'n Ben's outfit, the court adopted a philosophical attitude toward the matter. They confined Tom Gilly to quarters for thirty days for spreading a false alarm and pronounced the incident closed.

FOR MORE than ten years prior to the arrival of the French, Juan Neponuceno Cortinas had been the big shot in northern Mexico. Starting as a small-time bandit, he had welded together the lawless element on both sides of the river until he had made himself virtual dictator of the state of Tamaulipas, finally instaling himself as governor.

General Mexia had arrived suddenly just as "Cheno" had loaned most of his men to the Union commander who was attempting to capture Brownsville. The Confederates took care of the force Cortinas had sent across the river, and Mexia had little trouble in wiping out the rest.

Cheno, with his usual luck, managed

to escape and headed for his old hide-out in the Burgos mountains. But late in 1865 he emerged from retirement and came back to the vicinity of Matamoras determined to stage a comeback. After dodging around through the chaparral for most of the winter, he recruited three hundred negroes who had been mustered out of the Union army occupying Brownsville. With these under his command, Cheno was open for business.

With two game cocks such as Ben Thompson and Cheno Cortinas running loose in the same patch of brush, it was a cinch bet that feathers would fly before long. Ben's crew hadn't thrown a party since the night of the big ball, and were getting bored. Cheno and his new outfit were scouting a good opening for an enterprising bunch of bandits. So it didn't require a course in astrology to see blood on the moon.

Cortinas decided to open up by striking at the wagon trains plying between Monterey and Matamoras. With nothing useful to occupy his attention, it would have been a sign that he should consult a doctor if Ben Thompson hadn't thought of something unsanctified to get into. And what more natural than that he should hit upon the same project? The only coincidence was that they should both get the idea at the same time.

Cortinas circled south of Matamoras and ambushed his men along the Matamoras-Monterey road. Ben sent a couple of men south to do some scouting. Then he crossed the rest of them to the Texas side, rode twenty-five miles up-stream and recrossed. Riding south, he encountered his scouts who reported the approach of eighty heavily guarded wagons. They also reported Cortinas' plans to muscle in on his new industry.

News of the unexpected competition caused Ben to revise his plans somewhat. From an eminence overlooking the road, the Texans watched in sardonic amusement while the Cortinistas pounced on the convoy and, after a short but sanguinary engagement captured fifty wagons before they could be destroyed. Then the Austin Bearcat and the Pride of Tamaulipas matched claws for who took the loot. Cortinistas had been pretty badly cut up in the preliminary round with the wagon guards, and the Texas champion won an easy decision, netting him forty wagons and over a hundred mules.

Ben crossed his loot over to Texas where he made a deal with John Mason, a small rancher with an adjustable code of morals. Mason was to take the loot to San Antonio and dispose of it. The rancher was to keep half of the proceeds for his share in the deal. The other half was to be deposited with banker John Twohig, two thousand dollars to the credit of Ben's wife and the rest to be divided among Ben and his men later on. Mason proved to be an efficient salesman, but aside from that he was something short of perfect in several minor details. Maybe he didn't think that bankers could be trusted with money.

Cortinas decided that conditions on the Border were not very promising, so he moved south and joined the anti-imperialist army under General Escobedo. At the battle of Queretaro he was second in command.

Following the withdrawal of the French troops supporting Emperor Maximilian in Mexico, General Mexia and the remainder of his troops, including Ben and his Texans, also moved south to Queretaro where they joined General Miramon and the fleeing Emperor. The desperate part they played in that decisive battle where the last hope of an empire flickered out in tragedy, is history. And whether or not the old *maestro* Cortinas ever knew it, he was amply requited for the affair of the wagon train.

Ben and a few of his men escaped after their defeat at Queretaro and made their way on foot toward the coast. Descending into the *tierra caliente* around Tampico, they fell victim to the dread scourge of the hot country—yellow fever. Ben, alone, succeeded in mak-

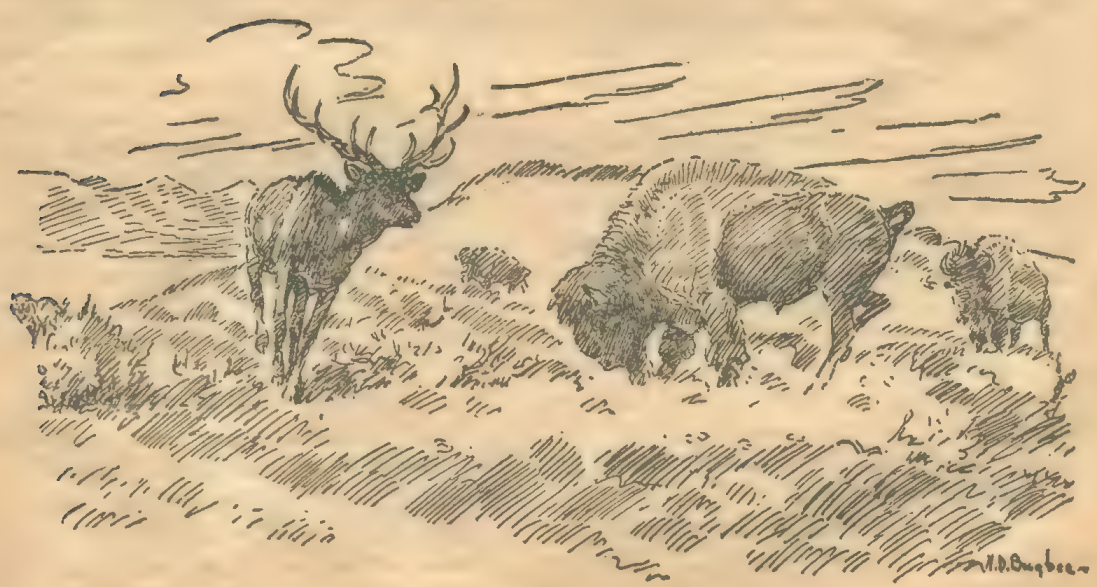
ing his way into Tampico and gained admission to the hospital where he remained for eight months. Under the efficient ministrations of the good Sisters of Mercy, he recovered from an attack which few in that day survived. Months later he arrived in Austin, a mere shadow of his former self and his health permanently broken. But his propensity for getting into trouble was not impaired, and it wasn't long until he had run bang into further humiliation.

Shortly after his return to Austin, Ben had a run-in with Julius Brown, a boyhood friend. Both drew and both missed. A reconstruction detail gathered Ben in. Before a court martial he drew four years in the penitentiary which he served. Thus, the only time that Ben Thompson ever served was for the only shot of record that he ever missed. From which you might draw the conclusion that the unforgivable sin in Texas was to shoot at a man and not hit him.

Coming in the next issue

Stories of Romance and Danger

By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH, L. LINDLEY MULKEY, CLEE WOODS, CLIFF WALTERS and others.



Buck Luck

By Elsa Barker

This little short short story tells about two men, one girl, and a bet they made in the shooting season.

IN NEW MEXICO the big game hunting season would open in just three days. Vance Mackey and Jerry Winters sat across the room from each other swapping past hunting stories, discussing future ones. Maybe Vance Mackey's stories, told in his smug, superior tone, were just a little bigger than usual, for each man was intensely conscious of Sue Kendall's intoxicating presence. Both had been trying for the past year to impress upon her the importance of choosing the right man for a husband.

Sue was only half listening tonight. Her blue eyes were fixed on the blazing logs in the fireplace, her hands slowly wheedled soft music out of an old guitar.

Vance Mackey topped Jerry's last story with one that was bigger and wilder than any that had gone before, and then added:

"Let's make a bet this hunting season. Bet you I get my buck before you do!"

Jerry Winters looked doubtful.

"Now wait a minute," he said. "I don't lay claim to being a hunter. I never killed but one buck in my life and that was fifty per cent luck."

Sue laid her guitar down and smiled at both men.

"Why not?" she said. "It wasn't just luck that you got a deer last year, Jerry Winters, and you know it! Let me hold stakes."

Handsome Vance Mackey flashed Sue a white toothed smile.

"Attagirl, Sue!" He looked at Jerry. "Afraid?" he taunted.

Jerry flushed, then shrugged.

"All right! What'll it be? A hat, a bridle, a saddle—"

Vance shook his head. His answer came so readily that Jerry suspected he had planned it all out beforehand.

"No," he said. "Nothing cheap. For a year we've been trying to prove to

Sue which one's the best man. Let this be the test. The loser agrees not to ask Sue for any dates for the next six months. What say, Sue?"

Sue looked up with a queer little smile on her face.

"I'm not betting," she said slowly. "What do you say, Jerry? Are the odds too stiff for you?"

Jerry Winters' face reddened. It was unfair, and both men knew it. Maybe Sue did too. Vance Mackey had brought in a buck every year for the last five seasons, while Jerry had to his credit only one. But with Sue's quiet eyes on his face and a scornful smile beginning to curl Vance Mackey's lips, Jerry found it hard to refuse. He got suddenly to his feet.

"All right!" he agreed. "It's a bet!" He looked down at Sue from his tall, lean height. "And I reckon any gal that lets her favors be won that way prob'ly ain't worth the winning anyhow."

He reached for his hat and strode out the door.

THE first morning of the hunting season was clear, and very cold. A snowstorm two days before had sent the mercury tumbling close to zero the last two nights.

Jerry Winters, up several hours before daylight in order to have time to do his chores and ride to hunting country by sunup, felt the icy bite of winter as he headed his horse up the pitch black trail.

From the first, hunter's luck was against him. Half a dozen times that day when, after hours of painstaking, careful catfooting, he seemed on the verge of bopping his buck, something went wrong.

The first chance came half an hour after sunup. A nice buck was grazing on an open grassy bench. An easy shot, a hundred yards away, standing broadside. Jerry raised his gun—and discovered that the front rifle sight had been bent to one side. He wondered if somebody in the bunkhouse had tampered with it. The deer didn't wait until he got it fixed.

The second chance was perfect. A smaller deer this time—a four pointer—only twenty yards away in an aspen thicket. Jerry raised his rifle again, and the first cartridge snapped. The deer heard it, whirled and bounded off. Jerry took a running shot at the gray shape shuttling through the aspens and missed.

The third time somebody off down the hill opened a bombardment at another buck just as Jerry was easing his rifle noiselessly to his shoulder, and again a nice buck spooked off through dense fir thickets before Jerry could shoot.

And so on through the day.

But the last time was the worst, because this time it was a huge buck, one of the largest Jerry had ever seen. It was late. Jerry had decided to hunt out one last piny slope before making his way back to his horse. Already the shadows in the pines were blackening. In another fifteen minutes it would be too dark to shoot.

Suddenly off down the slope he saw a gray and white deer's rump. It was too big to be a doe, but the head was behind a huge old pine tree, and Jerry had to be sure he had horns. He raised his boot—took a cautious step to the right—another—his pants cuff caught on a stiff oak stump. He sprawled flat with a clattering crash.

For a split second off down the hill below him a huge antlered head swung into view, and then the *thud, thud* of hoofs told him that his last chance had gone.

Tired and discouraged, he hiked back to his horse and headed him down toward the Kendall ranch. From them he would learn what luck Vance Mackey had had today. In spite of his talk the other night, it mattered terribly. He knew, and had known then, that he wanted Sue Kendall even if he had to win her this way.

Sue heard the dogs barking and came out to the gate to meet him.

"Any luck, hunter?" she called.

"Lots of it," Jerry said. "All bad."

He waited a minute.

"Vance get anything?"

"Yes, he came by about eight this morning with a big ten pointer in his car."

Jerry took a deep breath and tried to laugh.

"Well," he said. "How about a date for a picnic on Old Baldy next Fourth of July?"

Sue laughed a little.

"Come in to supper, Jerry. Dad and I've eaten, but I've kept some warm on the back of the stove for you."

Jerry shook his head.

"Not tonight. Thanks."

Sue reached out and caught his bridle rein.

"Come on in!" she ordered. "Your bet didn't say anything about *me* asking *you* for dates—and it isn't polite to refuse a lady's invitation. I've got something I want to tell you."

Jerry grinned and swung down from his horse.

"Since you put it that way, lady—just this once."

SUE sat down at the table opposite him, propped her elbows on the table and watched him eat.

"Jerry," she asked. "Did it ever occur to you that you could have had someone else kill your deer for you yesterday or the day before, so you'd be sure and have it ready?"

Jerry stared at her.

"Nope. It didn't. And if it had, I wouldn't."

Sue smiled. She was silent a minute, then presently she said:

"That was a crazy bet the other night. Maybe I was crazier to let you go on with it—but I've had such a time making up my mind about you two, I hated to make either of you feel bad. I thought maybe something would happen that would make me sure. And then as soon as the bet was made, I hoped and hoped that you'd win, Jerry. That you wouldn't fail me."

Jerry gulped a little.

"I'm sorry, Sue. I did my best. But a bet's a bet. Maybe if you still feel that way six months from now—"

Sue smiled a tender little smile.

"You didn't fail me, Jerry. You wouldn't, ever. I know that now. You see, Vance cheated; he had somebody else kill his deer. I couldn't ever marry a liar and a cheat."

Jerry's hands suddenly shook a little.

"Do you mean—"

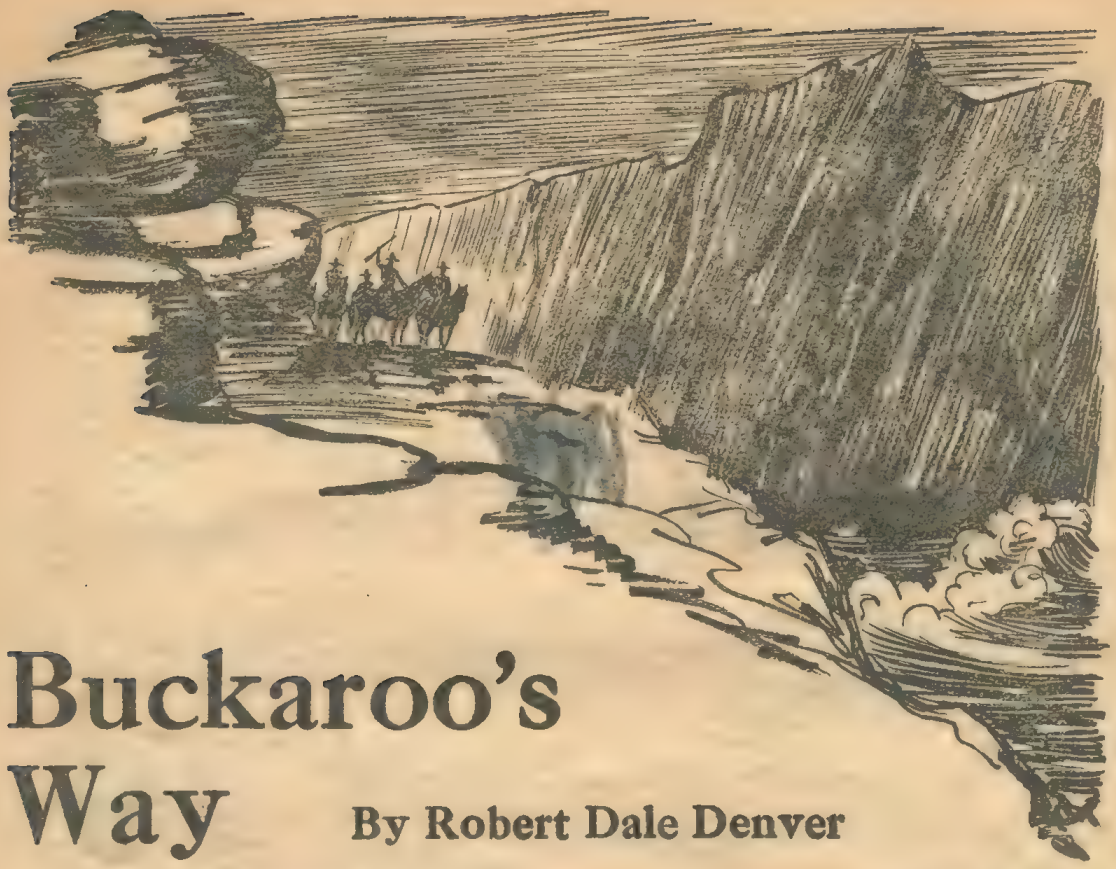
"I mean, you big goof," Sue laughed, "that I'm asking you to marry me."

Five minutes later Jerry looked down at the bright head against his shoulder.

"Just one thing, honey," he said. "You oughta give Vance a chance to speak for himself. Just because maybe some guy says he killed a deer for Vance ain't—"

Sue raised her head so that one mirthful blue eye peeped up at him.

"Nobody told me anything." Her voice suddenly shook with breathless laughter. "Vance had either had too many drinks or else he thought I was awful dumb. It was cold this morning—but not cold enough to freeze a fresh killed deer—and the buck Vance brought in here at eight o'clock was frozen solid!"



Buckaroo's Way

By Robert Dale Denver

Part Five

SYNOPSIS

STARK (VAQ) WETHERILL, son of a murdered ex-sheriff.
NIDA GRESHAM, ranch owner.
TIM LAFLIN, her foreman.
GRIEF RODEBAUGH, her cook.
CAPTAIN JOHN GALLATIN, her uncle.
THE SCARRONS, a family of outlaws.
PATRICK JORY, a Scarron posing as a lawyer.
MRS. SQUIERS and PROFESSOR HANNEFELDT, leaders of an expedition to explore Indian ruins.

Scarron outlaws break out of prison, kill ex-sheriff Dan Wetherill and escape to Quivira Mt., where Stark pursues them.

Nida Gresham meets the Squiers-Hannefeldt Expedition and also Patrick Jory, who tells her that years ago her uncle and the Scarrons looted a church in Mexico. Capt. Gallatin hid the treasure on Quivira Mt., where he lives surrounded by deaf-mutes. Jory, claiming to be a lawyer representing the church, has contacted Gallatin in an effort to recover the treasure. Gallatin has sent Jory to locate Nida.

Nida agrees to accompany Jory to her uncle, also arranging that her foreman lead the expedition into the same territory. On Quivira Nida helps Stark escape from being unjustly hanged for murder. Then they all go to Gallatin Canyon, which place is immediately besieged by the Scarrons, who are after the treasure. There Capt. Gallatin reveals an Indian city discovered by him. In it are countless valuable objects. The Captain used the stolen treasure to finance his restoration work.

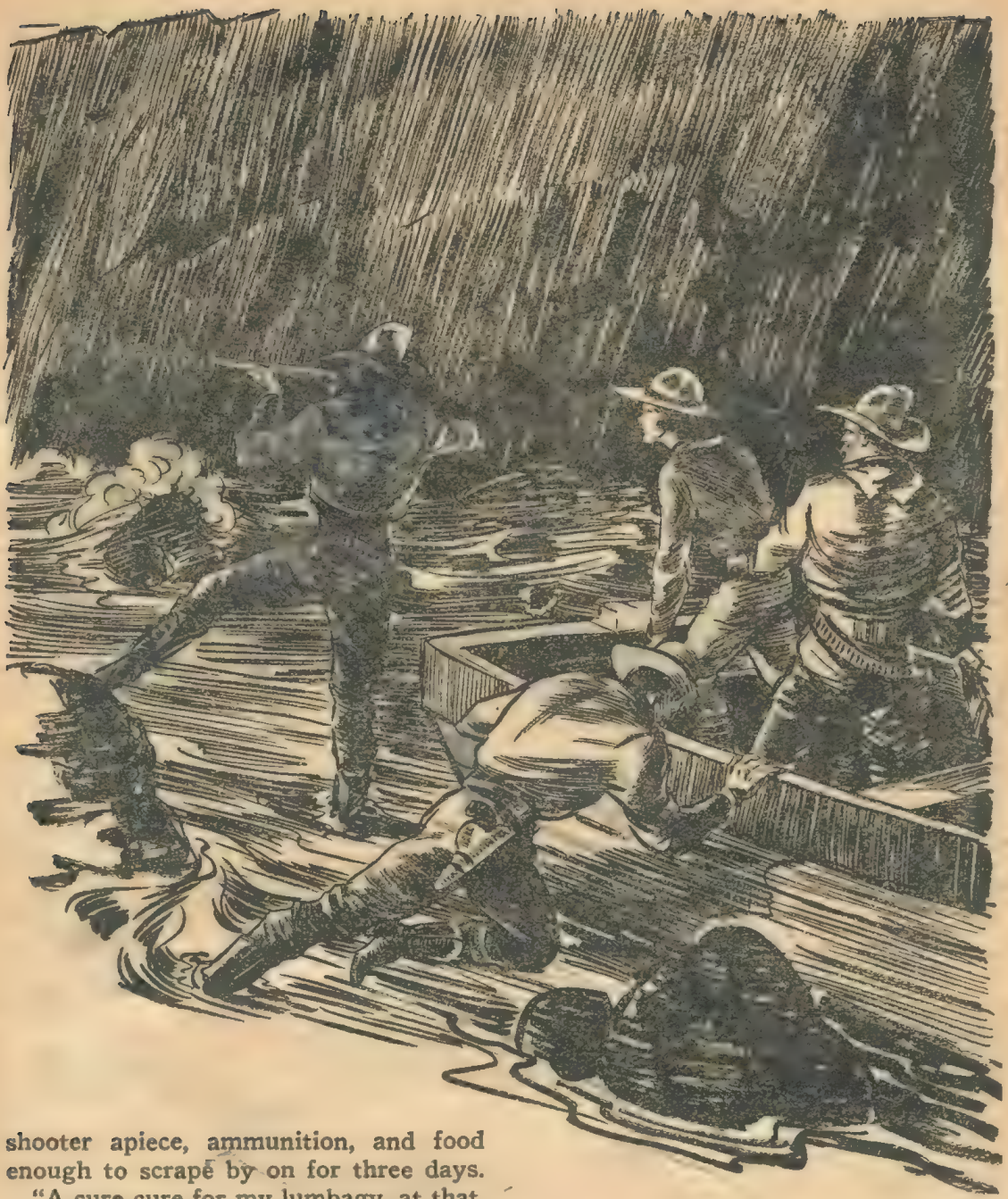
Because of Jory the Scarrons almost succeed in getting in the canyon, but Jory is discovered in time and held prisoner. Meanwhile the Captain is fatally wounded and dies naming Nida, Stark and Prof. Hannefeldt trustees of his discovery. It seems impossible to hold the outer wall. All except Stark and a few men retreat up the canyon to the Indian city. On the way Nida is captured by Jory, who has escaped, and is rescued by Stark.

The Gallatin party realize there is no hope for them unless they have help. Therefore Stark, Nida, Grief and Laflin arrange to run the dangerous rapids of Black Gorge, into which Gallatin Canyon runs, in order to get to the outside world for aid.

CHAPTER XIX

Down Gallatin Canyon

STARK and the other volunteers began preparations to leave as soon as night had fallen. Chaps, spurs, they left behind, and slickers. In the rains that had been falling almost constantly, they would be soaked from the start anyway. They took a short-barreled saddle gun and six-



shooter apiece, ammunition, and food enough to scrape by on for three days.

"A sure cure for my lumbagy, at that, this here trip," predicted Grief. "If we don't git shot by them polecats, we'll shore get drowned."

Nida went in for a final look at Captain Gallatin, who would be buried next morning in his city. The face of the old man looked singularly peaceful, as if he had died certain that the place would be saved from looters.

The girl went out into the rain-drenched darkness, wondering if she would ever live to return and explore the wonders of the many buildings. Wetherill, Laflin and Grief were waiting for her. Jim Newsom was given command of the defense. The deaf-mute Mexicans, downcast over the death of their employer, docilely accepted the new leadership.

A fresh downpour of rain came from the dark sky as they shook hands soberly

with Dr. Hannefeldt, Mrs. Squiers, Newsom, and the remaining wranglers of the Squiers-Hannefeldt Expedition of Modern Conquistadors for the Exploration of Ancient Indian Pueblos. Each party muttered to the other, "Good luck." The plight of both was so serious that there was no choice so far as safety went between those who went and those who remained. If the river party failed to get through, it meant the end of the others also.

Wetherill swung Nida easily into the wet car and climbed in, with Grief and Tim Laflin following, the four being crowded into a tiny space about as big as the basket of a balloon.

The smaller cable was paid out, letting them slip down into the dark pit of the canyon bottom. Descending slowly at first, the car, as it reached the incline, picked up speed. The slight scraping noise of the greased wheels along the cable was drowned in the spatter of the rain on the puddly ground.

A fire was burning in the shed next to the adobe building which Stark had partially destroyed that morning by dynamite, but the light did not reach the cable tower. So thick was the darkness, not even a dim outline of the high heaps of débris, or the cable tower could be seen. Their immediate worry was the chance that the Scarrons might have a man at the tower, guarding against such an attempt to escape. If discovered, they would have to try to fight a way out; to get back to the terrace by the car was impossible, since the Scarrons would be able to cut the cable long before the quartette could be hauled up again.

The car slackened speed as it approached the tower and, with a slight jar, slid to a stop above the platform.

Wetherill, six-shooter ready, cautiously stepped out. Finding no guard, the others piled out and followed Wetherill to the nearest of the débris mounds. In a few moments the car would be pulled up again, so the Scarrons would not see it and know it had been used for an escape.

They needed horses next and the only way to get them was to raid the adobe corral, unfortunately not far from the shed where the fire blazed.

Leaving Grief and Nida, Wetherill and Tim Laflin headed for the corral, while a fresh downpour drenched them from the sky. Wetherill, leading the way, made a wide circuit to avoid the light thrown from the fire under the shed. The horse corral would certainly be guarded; even if the few trails leading out of the canyon were being watched, the Scarrons would guess that the besieged would try to get word out that night. A messenger would try, first of all, to get a horse.

After they were in the darkness at the back of the corral, Stark left Laflin and slipped along the wall to locate the guard. The fire in the shed had been built higher, and was illuminating the corral front more strongly than Wetherill liked.

Warily, he took a look-see around a corner, just as a man came to the doorway of the shed and stood looking out into the rain. The giant, Jupe Scarron, bulked big against the firelight.

"Keep your eyes open, Ike," Jupe roared. "It's Dan Wetherill's son we're dealin' with. We made a mistake about the father and paid with twenty years in the pen."

"I'll be on the lookout, old rooster," growled a man located somewhere near the corral gate.

The horses, stirred up by some kicker, milled inside the walls. There were not more than a dozen animals; the rest had been hobbled out to graze on the scanty grass in the canyon. Saddles had been left out in the rain atop the corral wall.

Jupe growled an order and men began emerging from the shed. In a group, they moved toward the dike to start some shenanigan or other. As they clumped through the puddles, the rain stopped abruptly. A little wind blew down the canyon, but the cloud blanket held overhead. Two of the men stayed by the fire in the shed, wounded men probably.

Stark could hear the guard muttering at the chill, and trying to keep warm by stomping up and down before the gate. Hugging the wall, Wetherill inched along it, six-shooter ready. Peering about the corner, he saw the back of the guard, a tall man in a high-peaked sombrero, moving away from him.

Wetherill flashed into action at once, taking two pantherish steps to swing his gun against the tall crown. The guard bent at the knees and went down without a groan, knocked cold. Wetherill's movement had been unseen, but one of the men in the shed was just stepping outside. Stark snatched up the tall sombrero, substituted it for his own, and stood, back plastered against the wall, as the guard might have done.

The guard lay on the wet ground by the wall, a part of its shadows. For a few seconds the man in the shed stood looking at the corral, an animal sense within him perhaps giving warning something was wrong while the sight of the tall figure under the peaked sombrero told him all was well. Then the fellow returned to the fire, and Wetherill, starting to pace back and forth, managed to drag the unconscious man around the corner out of sight. There, using a strip of whang leather, he swiftly tied the guard. Returning to pace up and down before the corral gate, he heard the man start to mutter and groan. Stark disappeared again to gag the fellow with his own neckerchief.

To his left a boot scraped on a rock. Stark turned toward the sound, gun in his hand.

"Laflin," muttered Nida's foreman. "Need help?"

"I could use it. I got to act as dummy out there in front. Can you drop inside and saddle four horses?"

"I c'd drop into a zoo and rope and saddle four man-eatin' tigers," stated Laflin.

The first gun sounded below the dike and a booming chorus of explosions followed, which didn't help quiet the already milling horses. Consequently, when Laflin entered the corral to flip a wet rope, the men in the shed thought nothing of the excitement of the animals.

While Stark played his rôle of guard, Laflin caught and saddled four mounts, finishing just as the guns under the dike were stopping. Then the foreman, after cutting the cinches and latigo straps on the remaining saddles, hurried back to bring Nida and Grief to the corral.

The Scarrons had not got far in their attack. As soon as they started to climb along the steep trail, the fires were started above, illuminating the whole front of the dike. After two men had been hit and a lot of shots wasted, the fighters began straggling back to the shed for hot coffee before making another try.

"Got a hunch we better go," said Wetherill, when Laflin arrived with Nida and Grief. "They might change guards. Bring 'em out, Tim." He let down the bars, and Laflin handed out the bridle leathers of two of the saddled horses, and followed leading the other pair.

"If you'll wait a minute," said the foreman, "I'll haze the rest of these *caballos* out."

"No time for that," snapped Wetherill. "Let's hit leather and get started." Drawn by the noise of the horses clopping out over the wet ground, one of the men in the shed appeared in the doorway. "Hey, what's up, Ike?" he yelled, seeing the saddled horses. "Hey, Ike! What the devil's goin' on there?"

Laflin and Wetherill were dragging the horses around the corral wall just as the man fired. The bullet came just in time to knock down one of the loose animals which were rushing out of the pen on their own accord.

Answering the bellowing summons of the man at the shed, the Scarrons who were returning from the dike raced toward the corral, shooting fast in the darkness.

The fugitives, already mounted, galloped down canyon.

Twenty guns at least were booming behind them, and Laflin grunted. Wetherill thought he saw the foreman sway

in the saddle, but the next instant Laflin had turned to empty a six-shooter.

Racing into the wagon road over which Nida had been brought captive that morning, the quartette gained the cover of the huge boulders lining the trail, and slowed their mounts. With horses turned out and saddles cut, there should be considerable delay before the Scarrons could follow, but Gallatin Canyon twisted many weary miles to reach Black Rock Gorge.

Below, at the Gallatin fortress, it was possible a man or two might be placed as lookouts, but when Wetherill led the way straight toward the gap in the wall, there came no challenge. They crossed the soft heap of earth, and the canyon was open to them.

For a moment Wetherill considered trying a way out on one of the mountain trails, but he had no reason to doubt Jory's claim that they were blocked. Besides, in the darkness, to locate a path would be almost impossible.

Down Gallatin Canyon and Black Rock Gorge lay their only chance. For an hour they kept up a steady pace, a fast trot over the rough floor of the canyon, until Nida called out for them to stop. Laflin's left arm had been hit by a bullet during their flight below the dike, but he had kept it to himself until pain pulled a smothered groan from him.

They stopped and after Grief and Wetherill had built a fire from a little dry wood gouged from a dead cedar, they examined Laflin's bloody arm. The bullet had passed through, leaving a bone badly chipped, but not broken. They bandaged it, bound it against Laflin's chest to ease the jarring torture of riding, and went on under the black sky.

As near as they could estimate, they should reach Black Rock Gorge at about daybreak. After that they would need an indefinite time to find a boat and get it launched.

Laflin only grunted when they later questioned him about the arm; he had forgotten it, he claimed. "Now, if it was lumbago," he hoorawed Grief, "I'd have something to yell about."

It was past midnight when they heard the faint beat of pursuing hoofs. The Scarrons had lost little time after all in getting mounted. With pursuit pushing up close, there was plenty to worry about, and for the first time in days Stark found time to do it. The job of locating one of the three hidden boats, the dangers of Black Rock Gorge, Laflin's disability, the responsibility for Nida, all weighed him down suddenly. And behind them, the Scarron horses were pounding nearer.

Nida rode close to him as they dropped to a walk for a steep descent, and he stopped their horses long enough to lean over, put his arm about her and kiss her. She had had little sleep the night before and had been through enough to break most men. But not a cheep of protest had come from her, and he knew there'd never be any.

"I'm going to stay back and check them a little," he stated as they entered the narrow defile. "They can't get their horses past me and when they come on afoot, I'll light out. It can't be so far to the river now."

"You're going to hold them back alone?" she protested.

"Yeah. Laflin needs rest; so do you. One gun's enough to make them keep their distance; they won't do any rash stumbling down this canyon in the dark. You keep on for the river and as soon as daylight comes, hunt for a boat. Get as much rest meanwhile as you can."

Her arm stole around his neck, and he caught her to him for a long moment.

"All this can't be real," he groaned. "It can't be. We must be dreaming. There can't be a gang of cursed convicts trailing us. I wish I had tried blowing them all up with that box of dynamite."

"You wouldn't have done it," she said. "Because you're the law in Gallatin Canyon, and the law doesn't blow up even Scarrons. No more than your father would have killed them. He

brought in his prisoners alive. We're going to get out, Stark, and bring back enough men to surround the Scarrons."

"But first we've got to run a river flooded by a week of rain."

"Hush," she ordered. "You sound sorta discouraged, young fella. I know you're thinking about what may happen to me. I won't have that; I want to be of help to you—not a drag. Now, and always. If I weren't here, you'd be whistling, figuring you had the Scarrons whipped. Snap out of it, buckaroo!"

From the strong, unconquerable spirit of the girl, Wetherill took sudden strength. This trouble would pass, as the storms would pass, to let the clear cobalt of the sky through again.

"You're right. They can't lick us." Weariness and worry melted in the contact of warm lips.

Then Nida was riding on, while Stark dismounted to tie his horse out of bullet range. Returning up the canyon some distance, he listened intently to the sound of approaching hoofs. Ten men, he guessed, maybe fifteen. When the party rode closer, he fired a few shots. An answering burst of bullets came. The Scarron riders were dismounting, as he had figured, to crawl cautiously down canyon. Stark fired fast, exchanging shots for a time.

Then, leaving them still advancing, he rode on to halt again when the clop of hoofs sounded close. Once more he checked them for a half-hour or so, and rode on again.

Faint light was seeping through the cloud blanket into the canyon. He could hear the faint murmur of rapids and knew the river was not far away. He went on, his horse at a run through the wet brush, and came to the river itself.

There Nida, afoot, ran to meet him. Instead of resting, she, Laflin and Grief had searched for the boats. Laflin had just stumbled onto one, hidden on a ledge above the river. Wetherill laughed exultantly. That was an unexpected piece of luck. Even the sudden torrents of water that suddenly poured from the sky could not dampen their spirits.

"And so it rained again," Stark chuckled. "And Noah went back down in the cabin of the ark and said, 'Let's deal another round of poker, boys, and then go and feed them blamed elephants and giraffes.' "

CHAPTER XX

Black Rock Gorge

THE SCARRONS had spared no expense in the rough-river boats which had been made to order for them. The one Laflin had found hidden in the underbrush was a stout affair of oak, a little over twenty feet in length. New, with gleaming white paint, freshly calked, it was ready to challenge the dangers of rapids and whirlpools. There were three compartments, the middle one about four feet long, smaller ones at each end. These, tightly covered with hatches and with canvases drawn taut over them, made the vessel all but unsinkable.

Between the compartments were two places for rowers. The steersman, with a long sweep oar, would stand on the deck of the after compartment.

Tim Laflin, handicapped by having the use of only one arm; and Grief had already opened the compartments. The contents, rubber waterproof bags containing provisions—flour, salt, coffee, dried meat and cooking utensils—they were dumping out. No need for them since their journey to Lightning Creek would not take over a day.

"Better find the other two boats and put holes in 'em," advised Laflin, but Wetherill shook his head.

"No time to look for the other two boats now. Scarrons pushing up too close. After we get this baby launched, we'll try to find the other pair."

Grief Rodebaugh hefted the heavy oars approvingly. The steering sweep, extra heavy, was sixteen feet long. Extra oars were slung on each side of the boat under the gunwales, and the boat was also supplied with life-preservers.

Nothing had been overlooked by the Scarrons. There was even material with which to repair holes which rocks might punch in the bottom or sides.

Even with the compartments unloaded, the boat was all they could handle. Stark lifted the bow, taking on his broad shoulders the brunt of the downward shove of the weight as they descended toward the river. Panting hard under the burden, slipping on a slope that was as slick as wet soap, they finally reached the muddy bank. Carefully, they lowered the boat into the water and tied it to a rock.

Then, with the stream roaring loud in their ears, Grief caught Wetherill's shoulder and whirled him about. Through the driving rain, they could see horsemen pounding down Gallatin Canyon, spurring their weary mounts into a final burst of speed. Wetherill and Grief snatched up their carbines from the boat, and at the gesture, the pursuers swung their horses broadside and dismounted, dragging rifles from saddle scabbards.

"Let's go," said Wetherill, and hustled Nida into the rower's space between the middle and stern compartments. When she was settled, he flung shots to cover Grief and Laflin while they stepped in. Then Stark flung off the rope and leaped to the after deck.

There, as the current took hold of the vessel, Wetherill hastily placed the long steering oar in its lock, while Grief and Nida wielded their oars.

The Scarrons had opened fire over the saddles of their horses, finding it difficult to shoot in the light, dusky from the rain and the gloom of the canyon bottom.

Laflin squatted on the middle deck and, holding a carbine to his shoulder, emptied the gun and picked up another. His shots were close enough to make the horses jump, spoiling the Scarrons' shooting.

They had launched the boat on the down-stream side of Gallatin Canyon and an outjutting rib of a huge cliff made a protecting bulwark. A final flock of bullets whizzed by them. Then, caught by the full force of the reddish waters of the flooded river, they were whisked swiftly between the high walls, racing down toward a sullen roaring which indicated rapids.

Just before the river swept them swiftly around a rounded flank of granite, Wetherill looked back and saw a group of men standing on the bank. He identified Jory and Jupe Scarron among them. The men fired a last burst of ineffective shots and disappeared, undoubtedly to run to get one of the other boats. The all-night chase had been merely transferred from horseback to boat, but the pursuit would probably be less of a threat than the river itself.

As they dropped farther into the depths of Black Rock Gorge and heard the ominous roar of the big rapids ahead, Wetherill's confidence evaporated. It was bald suicide to make the attempt without a full crew of men and a careful preliminary scouting of all the rapids. Each stretch of bad water would have to be shot as they came to it; there was no time to line down the boat by means of ropes, or to tie up and pick out the safest channel. Not with the Scarrons in pursuit, desperate, knowing that their lives and hopes for fortune depended on stopping the fugitives.

Above them, the black precipices, rain shrouded, had no visible rim, but stretched seemingly to the sky. The roar of the rapids ahead became more menacing. The banks of rubble and gravel disappeared; the currents swept from cliff to cliff.

They shot about a great abutment of rock and saw the river ahead, lashed to a torrent, descending in a series of steps in such quick succession that there seemed one continuous fall. Enormous waves reared crests of dirty foam.

Drawn toward the chute of roaring water, the boat was whirled along at greater and greater speed. Nida and Grief backed water with their oars, giving Wetherill and Laflin a little time to pick out the likeliest passage. While they consulted, all put on the cork life

belts, although an upset here meant certain death. The strongest swimmer could not stand the battering of the black rocks projecting from the boiling water.

They decided to keep close to the left side of the gorge. Laflin stood erect on the middle deck, holding to a rope hooked to the gunwhale on either side, ready to give orders to the rowers to pull either left or right, thus aiding Stark in the steering.

They shot two steep chutes, bobbed about to plunge down another pair, and abruptly were in a passage churned to foam by concealed rocks undoubtedly near the surface. Wetherill flinched, expecting the crash of hidden rock claws ripping out the stout bottom of the craft. Instead, the boat bounced lightly along and shot without a jar into a clear channel.

Another pair of rapids, stippled with glistening black fangs of rock, down which the boat leaped convulsively, rocking from side to side. Wetherill, straining at the long sweep, and helped by Nida's and Grief's oars, succeeded in shaving death by a hair. They were whirled around a curving buttress of granite, about which currents swirled and battled like the mad threshing of a wounded snake. Past this turmoil, they plunged at breakneck speed down a sloping straight trough, so narrow under the overcast sky, that it was like running a tunnel.

As the rain which had pelted them since the launching of the boat began to fall in earnest, it intensified the deep gloom of the gorge; turned the wet dark granite on each side to ebony. For a few miles they raced with the current, avoiding occasional dangerous piles of rock, until again the voice of the river became ominous with a sullen roaring. A single rapid came in sight, and, surveying it carefully, they slipped through without trouble and bounded on, under drenching gusts of rain, although the sky was taking on a faint glimmer that promised the sun might finally break through.

Easily, for several miles of clear going, the boat skimmed along, to run into a series of cataracts. Then a long straight stretch of water slid them along rapidly but peacefully between high walls. The rain had stopped and the dark blanket overhead changed to a dirty yellow.

It was light enough to see far back up the river. Nida was the first to catch a glimpse of two tiny specks of white far behind them. Wetherill's face set grimly. The Scarrons, with the two remaining vessels. The renegades had nerve, born of desperation, to risk Black Rock Gorge, although two vessels were safer than one, since if the crew of one craft met disaster, the other boat could come to their rescue.

Twisting about, the gorge narrowed, and for three or four miles ruin threatened them from rocks with added peril from giant whirlpools some twenty-five feet across and gyrating with great rapidity. Often their boat sank down into the hollow, to spin around helplessly, but since it was almost as long as the whirlpool's diameter, it could not be pulled in and, after a turn or two, popped out again.

In the long straight stretch, Stark saw the two chips behind them about the same distance back as when first sighted. The boats had drawn farther apart, a natural caution since if Wetherill's party should land to start a battle, both crews could not be attacked simultaneously.

The rims of the precipices on either side were revealed under the lighter sky as well over a thousand feet high, but a few breaks had appeared. If the Scarron boats had not been so close, Wetherill might have been tempted to land at one of these, to try to find a way up over the rims. He had, however, to consider not only their own safety, but that of the besieged people at Gallatin's city. There must be no delay in bringing help, and it might take two or three days to climb out and several days more to reach a ranch.

Lightning Creek, where the Gorge

ended, was their best bet, since, according to Newsom, the Lightning Ranch lay within easy walking distance. Just before they reached that creek, however, Newsom had warned them, was the roughest and most dangerous passage in the whole Gorge.

They had journeyed, they judged, two-thirds of the distance to Lightning Creek. Cheered by a sun that was battering a way through the clouds, they were able to relax for an hour. Joking with one another, they proposed that they try next the granddaddy of all boating feats, going through the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

Then abruptly after the river had bent in a graceful horseshoe, the stream seemed to disappear, so sharply did it drop. Directly ahead was a wilderness of tumbled fragments of cliff about which the stream roared and lashed and pounded, with a furious, deafening thunder. Beyond that the river dropped away again in a slide covered with solid foam, to disappear from view around a sharp bend. The booming of the rapids ahead made the threatening voice of all the previous cataracts seem puny.

They headed in toward the right wall which was not vertical, but rose in buttresses, terraces and perpendicular faces, with flanks of talus rising from the water. Holding the boat by strenuous use of the oars, they took a quick survey.

"Holy cow!" burst out Grief. "She jist drops off to hell-an'-gone and she prob'ly keeps on droppin' round that bend. Take your choice, folks. If we stop here, we git shot up by Scarrons. If we go on, we're supper for the fish."

"If we git through this," said Laflin, "I don't care if they bring on Niagary Falls next."

Wetherill's and Nida's glances met and locked for a long moment. Each was thinking the same despairing thing: This might be the last time they would look at one another.

They were in for it, however. Grief was right. If they stayed, they'd be shot; if they went ahead, they'd be drowned.

They ceased battling the current then and shot straight down the middle of the chute of roaring water. As the combers of the breakers began rolling over them, there was no longer time to think. The boat rolled and pitched like a crazed bronc and a cross current whipped them in toward high black boulders, but through fast use of the oars, it never quite touched them.

In the boiling current, tumbling, rocking, the boat at times leaped almost half its length out of water, to bury itself almost as far at the next lunge. The oar was jerked out of Nida's hand, but the ring of hide fastened near the handle prevented it from slipping through the oar-lock. Swamped with the muddy water, they were drenched repeatedly from head to foot.

The currents swept them far to the left. There were, as they had feared, more cataracts beyond the turn in the river, and as they were whirled about a great black buttress, Wetherill was glad that Nida was looking up-stream so she did not see the caldron below where monstrous billows heaved and tossed. Had there been opportunity, they would have pulled up to bail and to study the situation, but no amount of backing water could hold them back now.

In the din, Laflin's shouting penetrated faintly. "The gorge ends below. If we last just a little longer, we can make it. For Gawd's sake, keep her afloat!"

CHAPTER XXI

Into Hell—and Out

FOR ALL of them, the scene at the lower end of Black Rock Gorge held the terror of a hideous nightmare, but it had a beauty, too, which they were too busy to appreciate. At their left, over the first rim, cascades were pouring down, ground water tumbling into the river in wide sheets that sparkled clear in the sunlight now penetrating to the canyon bottom.

And as if to lend them hope, out of the mists rising below was a rainbow, its arch spanning the river which widened as it emerged from the gorge.

Swiftly they plunged down a great chute, to be almost swamped by breakers. Water swirled about their feet. Nida and Grief bailed frantically, but the boat remained full to the gunwales.

The voice of the river rose to an exultant roar, like an animal that would first terrify its prey by its growling. Beaten by the heavy hammer of the waves, they spun, gyrated insanely.

Nida, never ceasing to bail, looked up at Stark. She could see his face, set deeply in the fight to hold the boat from the rocks, the muscles of his arms bulging as he swept the great oar from side to side.

Stark, as he strained at the oar to keep the boat off a huge mass of stone on their left, was thinking he must have gone crazy. For the black bulk, jutting high above the water, seemed to be rocking in the current. Then as they swept near, he saw it was actually moving, its base so carved by the river sand that the great rock was balanced to swing back and forth under the push of the stream.

Tossed like a bobbing cork from the chute, they were dropped over a fall, and then the whole river seemed to leap from its bed to engulf them. After that, they were in the hands of the gods, assailed by giant waves that broke and tumbled in a mad endeavor to batter the boat to the bottom of the stream. The craft filled, and though reeling from the continuous blows, like a punch-drunk fighter, it managed somehow to fight through.

Apparently they had reached safety when one great wave, geysering forth from some subterranean bore, flung itself at them, carrying the water-logged craft up, up, on a tremendous billow. Then, as the crest of the wave they were mounting broke, it struck the bow, and the vessel abruptly turned over.

The four people were lifted clear and flung into the churning water and held there, helpless for a few moments, in a huge whirlpool. Buoyed up by their cork belts, their heads bobbed about on the foam-churned dirty surface. The boat was ahead of them, bottom side up, being carried down-stream.

The quartette stared at one another unbelievingly. They were still alive! Alive to make it to the mouth of Lightning Creek—and security.

As they were spewed forth by the whirlpool, Wetherill saw immediately that Nida could swim as well as he and Grief. Laflin, however, seemed almost helpless, even after he had rid himself of the weight of his cartridge belt and holstered gun. Handicapped by his bad arm, the foreman also had been struck on the head and was half dazed. His right arm rose and fell feebly. Stark shouted to Grief and Nida, and when his voice failed to carry, motioned them to start swimming toward the cottonwoods. Then, signaling Laflin to catch hold of his belt with his good hand, Wetherill struck out.

Nida, swimming steadily and calmly diagonally across the strong sweep of water, paused as she gained the gentler current against the shore, and, with Grief, turned to see if Wetherill needed help. He waved them on reassuringly. Burdened by the foreman, he was being carried farther down-stream, but he was certain to make it into the wide mouth of the creek.

Reaching the slippery rocks at the edge of the bank, Nida and Grief pulled themselves out, dripping, and moved down to help Laflin and Wetherill come ashore. While Grief tugged at the foreman, Nida reached her hand down to Wetherill. Both men crawled up on the wet bank, then lay exhausted, panting heavily.

"Right into hell—and out again," said Grief. "Where do we go from here?" he asked, as he looked about him. "This is a heck of a hole to have lumbagy in, if you ask me."

"We ain't askin' you," grunted Laflin. "I never saw a handsomer lookin' spot than this. You blasted little kicker, you oughta be on your knees givin' thanks

for gittin' outa that jam. I'd 'a' sold out my chances back there for two *centavos.*"

Stark, recuperating, walked back along the creek that came down the side canyon for a look at the precipitous walls. A sharp call from Nida brought him back on a run.

The three were gazing up-stream, where the first of the pursuing boats had appeared.

There were five men in the boat and the vessel was plainly water-logged and in distress. Plunging like some creature that had gone mad, the white prow lifted and fell, hurtling forward, swinging about, disappearing momentarily from sight behind the huge waves. All except the steersman were bailing as fast as they could move their arms.

Escaping disaster by a series of miracles, the little craft shot between the bared fangs of rock, gyrated madly under overwhelming waves. And then, after it had emerged in apparent safety, it met exactly the same disaster as the other boat. It was carried high by a huge wave, the crest of which broke and dealt the vessel a terrific slap, turning it over.

Clearly the four observers, as intent as if their own lives were at stake, could see the men's bodies shoot through the air and plummet out of sight. The boat turned over and popped up again, right side up. Swept into another channel, it was flung against a reef of black rock. Evidently holes had been torn in the water-tight compartments, for the boat suddenly sank.

Not far behind, they could see the dark heads of three men who were buoyed up by their cork life belts. Of the other two, there was no trace.

The trio, once out of the whirlpool, started swimming diagonally toward the same shore reached by Wetherill's party. Two of them were stroking powerfully, but the last man was having trouble, splashing wildly and ineffectually. The inexpert swimmer, as the river brought him nearer, they identified as Jupe Scarron. They could hear him bellow an appeal to his two companions, one of them Gid, Jupe's brother with the scarred face. The pair paid no heed.

Jupe Scarron, swept inexorably down the river, saw the people on the bank and turned toward them, shouting desperately for help. The current was bearing him far to the left, toward a boiling maelstrom in which he would surely be lost. A fit end for Jupe, cold-blooded murderer, but again Stark felt the hand of his father on his shoulder. "It's a law officer's business to bring in prisoners alive," Dan Wetherill was saying.

Wetherill buckled on his cork jacket again and stooped to draw off his wet boots. His six-shooter and belt he gave to Laflin.

Nida, divining his purpose, reached out to put a restraining hand on his arm and then dropped it. It was Stark's decision to make, not hers. More practical, the girl would have steeled herself against giving aid to a renegade when it endangered another life. Saving Jupe Scarron from the river was only saving his neck from the hangman's noose.

Silently Wetherill trotted a few steps along the bank, gauging the currents and Jupe's drifting progress, then flung himself into the muddy water.

As the other two swimmers came near, Grief, whose six-shooter had been jarred from its holster at the time of the upset in the water, disappeared to return with a long pole. Laflin trained Wetherill's six-shooter on the pair.

"One at a time, y' two-legged, man-eatin' sharks!" yelled Grief, and batted out with his pole at the nearest of the pair of heads. "And come up outa there with your hands up."

Nida was watching Wetherill flailing the water to cut a diagonal course toward his father's murderer. Stark was already exceedingly weary from handling the heavy sweep oar and battling to drag Laflin ashore. Now, matching his strength against the river again, he appeared to be all but exhausted.

Jupe, buoyed by his cork belt, saw Stark and called again beseechingly,

then lashed the water with futile strokes.

The first of the Scarron pair to clamber up was a smooth-faced youth. Unarmed, terrified by his narrow escape from the river, he was so glad to plant his feet on land again that he meekly surrendered.

Gid Scarron, however, with blood running down from a cut in his temple, was still full of fight. As he crawled up out of the water, he was snarling, mouthing threats. Grief promptly batted him over the head, and then as Gid tried to draw the gun in his holster, Grief rapped him harder. Scarron subsided, putting up his hands and allowing Nida to take his gun. Leaving Laflin guarding the two, Nida and Grief ran down along the bank, following Wetherill and Jupe Scarron.

Stark had reached the renegade and, with Jupe gripping one of his rescuer's shoulders, turned back. It was a battle every inch of the way. Scarron apparently was too tired to help, and was content to let his big bulk be towed in. Wetherill's face showed the effect of the struggle. His arms cut the water more and more slowly.

"If you ask me," said Grief, "I'd say we put a bullet through Jupe and tell Vaq to cut out that foolishness. I'd sooner save a baby-eatin' tiger."

After what seemed an eternity, they came in, Wetherill completely exhausted. Grief reached out his pole as an aid to Stark, but he motioned toward Scarron. Jupe grabbed the pole eagerly.

"F'r two cents I'd shove him under," growled Grief, "but it wouldn't do no good. Stark'd fetch him back."

Jupe stumbled up on the bank, dripping water, apparently all in. His holster was empty.

"Watch that polecat!" yelled Laflin warningly, and Nida whipped up the captured six-shooter just in time.

Scarron, once on the shore, had recovered amazingly, and suddenly lunged toward Nida's gun. As she jumped back, Grief whacked Jupe with the pole. It broke without effect, but Nida dumped a shot at the giant's feet and, growling oaths, Jupe put up his hands.

Nida reached out a hand to Wetherill. Lifting his legs as if they were lead, he came up on the bank to collapse there, drawing deep, gasping breaths.

The others hazed the three prisoners into a group and tied the hands of each behind his back.

"No sign of the other boat," said Laflin.

"Won't be," snarled Jupe. "It smashed up ag'in a rock a few miles back and Jory and the other three in it was done for."

"Jory drowned? That's good news," stated Grief cheerfully.

Wetherill staggered groggily to his feet. "We got to move along. We're still a long way from Lovelace and from Gallatin Canyon. *Andale!*"

Slowly the procession moved up the creek. Nida took time for a last look at the river where they had been so close to disaster. The rainbow was still arching the flood. Wetherill stopped, too, and came back to draw her to him.

"Never saw more fit time and place for a rainbow," he said, as he kissed her.

CHAPTER XXII

The Face in the Mirror

WETHERILL went ahead to set the pace, taking long strides up the rock-strewn bottom of the side canyon. It mounted steeply into a wilderness of rock and brush, where he found a deer trail. The Scarrons, handicapped a little because their hands were tied, cursed when he failed to slacken pace on the narrow path which was steep like all trails used by light-footed animals in coming down to water.

Their protests made Wetherill aware that Nida was struggling also and he let Grief, who had less concern for speed than for his weary muscles, take the lead. Over Nida's protests, Stark lifted the girl in his arms and carried her until

they had reached the first rim above the river.

After that, the country mounted in a series of gradual steps, where Nida was able to keep up easily with the men. To show just how fresh she felt, she hummed a tune.

"This has been hell for you," Stark said to her. "But we'll leave you at the ranch ahead, while I ride on to Lovelace. You better take a couple of weeks of sleep. I feel I can use that much myself when this is over."

She smiled at him mischievously. "Of course, women have to be polite and pretend to be tired whenever men show signs of playing out. But I'm giving notice, young fella, you're not leaving me behind when you ride to Lovelace. I'm going along to see that you don't fall out of the saddle."

They were entitled to a little nonsense, with the river and its black snags and mad whirlpools far behind them. They struck a cattle trail that led across a piñon-covered mesa, rolling gently back from the river trough. Resting for an interval, they went on. The sun sank and twilight spread its purple mantle over the distant range.

It was almost exactly twenty-four hours since they had made the descent in the cable car, but Nida was thinking that a whole life-time could not have been more crowded. Almost every minute of those hours had been tense, fraught with menace. Their clothing had dried during their climb, and Nida, suddenly remembering that a bath in the dirty river water couldn't have helped her appearance, began dabbing at her face with a handkerchief.

"Hold up, everybody!" Stark ordered suddenly, and the pairs of clumping boots came to a halt. Borne on the still air came a faint singing, and through the dusk they saw a solitary figure riding into the trail. His voice came mournfully in the plaintive song of the range:

"It was once in the saddle I used to go dashing,
It was once in the saddle I used to be gay—"

"Nobody's ever going to make me think that's a sad song again," murmured Nida. "And the person singing it is a cowboy, Stark, and he hasn't broken out of Buena Vista and he's never heard of the city of the Zoltecs. Just a good-hearted, civilized cowboy that probably wouldn't even shoot a sheepherder for a whole carload of gold. I could throw my arms around him and kiss him."

"If you do, you'll probably scare him off into the brush," Wetherill teased her. "If you could only see yourself! I hate to be brutal, but you are a sight. Yessir, a sight for any man's eyes," he added and stole a hasty kiss.

The cowboy pulled up at Grief's croaking hail and was revealed as a beardless youth with rather a vacant face. As they came close enough so he could see them, he looked startled and as if he was of a mind to spur out of their vicinity. For which he was not to be blamed. The soaking in the muddy river had made them all look like scarecrows.

"Where you folks from?" he asked.

"What does it look like?" returned Wetherill, lightly. "What would you say if we told you we swam out of the river?"

The youth chuckled skeptically. "I s'pose next you'll try to tell me you come down Black Rock Gorge in boats."

"We might," said Wetherill. "In fact, we did."

The cowboy chuckled again. "And I s'pose next you'll be sayin' you're that Scarron convict gang what busted outa Buena Vista."

"Part of us are," returned Wetherill, and, as if he had just heard a rib-breaking witticism, the boy laughed long and loud.

"C'mon," growled Grief, "let's get this palaver over and line out. I'm tellin' you the signs for me gettin' lumbagy is shore certain this time. I want to git somewhere 'fore it grabs a-holt."

"How far to the Lightning Ranch?" asked Wetherill.

"'Tain't close," said the youth vaguely. "And 'tain't far neither.

Leastways wouldn't be if you had horses. I never walked there and don't never intend to." His contempt of people who walked instead of riding was in his voice.

"Don't bother figuring any more how far it is, sonny," said Wetherill. "We're going there. Does that horse of yours carry double?"

"Yeah, but—" objected the youth.

"Lucky for you it does," said Wetherill, "or you'd find out just how far it is afoot."

Wetherill took charge of the horse, and the young rider, much to his amazement, found himself sitting back of the saddle with the girl placed before him. Once more, the line of men shambled along, the Scarrons too weary even to swear.

Steadily they marched on until as they topped a hill the gaunt skeleton of a windmill rose directly ahead.

"A real ranch," said Nida, as Wetherill swung alongside the horse, "and a real windmill."

"I suppose you'll want to go up and throw your arms around that windmill, too," said Wetherill. "But I don't see any light. No light means no fire. No fire means no supper, until we get it. Bub," he said to the boy, "where's the cook?"

"Ain't none 'cept me," returned the youth. "I been livin' alone for the last week."

"You got a real fast horse on this ranch? One that can lope all the way from here to Lovelace?"

"Sure. We got horses that c'n gallop clear from hell to breakfast," said the youth. "But—"

"I wish you'd forget that word," said Wetherill. "I'm a deputy sheriff, and I've got to get to Lovelace in a hurry. How about getting me a horse?"

"If you're a deputy sheriff," said the boy, "that's all right. I was kinda thinkin' you might really be part of this here Scarron outfit that busted outa Buena Vista. I heard they was sure tough lookers." His eyes were on Wetherill and Nida smothered a chuckle.

"Two much thinkin' is going to be your ruination some day," said Wetherill. "You go get that fast horse."

"Get two of them," put in Nida. "I'm going wherever you go, buckaroo."

While the cowboy went off to wrangle horses, they ushered the prisoners into the house and lighted lamps. Nida washed Laflin's punctured arm and rebandaged it, while Wetherill hunted up a drink of whiskey for him. The Scarrons they put, tied hand and foot, in a shed-like room off the kitchen. The shed had no windows and the only door opened into the kitchen, so it would serve as a temporary jail. The three men, discouraged, exhausted, seemed to have given up all hope and lay slumped on the floor.

Grief stepped through the doorway, with an armful of wood. "I'll rustle up a meal," he volunteered cheerfully. "I believe, after all, I sure got this dang lumbagy licked. If bein' soaked by all them rains and bein' half drowned in the river didn't give me no lumbagy, it shore ain't never comin'. I kinda figger it's been all a sorta state o' mind anyway, me worryin' about it comin' until it actually does come."

Whistling loudly, Grief lifted up the stove lids, scraped out the ashes, and then bent over the wood-box. From him suddenly came a loud yell, a cry of anguish straight from the soul.

"Ow!" he squalled. "Golram it, she's struck! Lumbagy! Somebody grab holt o' me. I can't even straighten up. What I been tellin' you all along, hey? I knowed I'd git it. Oh, Ow!"

"Seems to me you did mention you were hit once in a while with a few twinges of back trouble," said Wetherill unfeelingly.

"A few twinges! Holy cow!" exploded Grief. "Pick me up and lay me on that cot. And handle me gentle, or I'll crown you soon's I'm able to git around ag'in."

"'Git sixteen gamblers to carry his coffin,'" singsonged Tim Laflin. "'Git six pretty maidens to bear up his pall.' We shoulda tied a rock to Grief and

throwed him in the river. Next three months all we're goin' to hear is the latest news on his lumbagy."

Wetherill deposited the little cook on a cot that sat in the kitchen, under a pair of antlers which served as rack for a shotgun and support for a mirror. Laflin generously handed over the bottle of whiskey Stark had found for him, and Grief did not stop until it was empty. "Lumbagy comes before bullet wounds any day," he said, at Laflin's howl of protest.

Wetherill and Nida took charge of the cooking, and there was a meal on the table in no time at all. Laflin, Nida and Stark ate at the table. Grief, lying grunting on his cot, refused to eat. In answer to the appeals of the Scarrons in their shed jail, Wetherill untied one hand of each man so he could eat and took filled plates in to them.

There came the sound of hoofs, the remuda brought in by the cowboy. Nida and Stark prepared to go to the corral. Laflin would stay at the ranch as guard over the prisoners, but mainly it was predicted to act as nurse for Grief.

Stark laid his six-shooter, belt and holster on the table for Laflin to use. The captured gun Nida had been carrying she placed beside it. They would need no weapons on their ride to the county seat.

"Well, s'long, folks," said Tim Laflin. "You'd better send over a carload of nurses to take care of this here backsprung biscuit wrangler. And y' better send over another nurse to nurse me after the breakdown I'm goin' to have from lookin' after Grief. But if you wanta do me a real big favor, string up that whole Scarron gang on the spot."

"We'll be thinkin' about you, Tim," promised Wetherill, "when we land that army on the Scarrons and squash 'em out flat."

Nida gave a low cry, and Wetherill turned. The girl's gaze was fixed on the window behind Stark, and in her blue eyes he read sheer terror. Their two guns were on the table, seven or eight feet away. Stark tensed to spring toward them as a boot rasped over the plank laid outside the open door of the kitchen.

"Hold it, Wetherill," ordered a voice that Stark would have been able to identify on his dying bed even if he had lived to be a thousand years old. Across from him the mirror under the antlers reflected the face of Patrick Jory, standing in the doorway, six-shooter in his paw.

"It's been a long chase," snarled Jory. "But, by Gawd, you ain't to Lovelace yet. And I can name a place damn easy that you're goin' to see before you ever look at that town."

There were two other Scarrons at the open windows of the kitchen, one with a rifle, one with a six-shooter. One was an oldish convict from Buena Vista, the other a wild-looking young fellow with long yellow hair.

Stark and Nida stood rigid in the middle of the room. Grief lay on his cot, helpless. Laflin was at the stove preparing to pour himself another cup of coffee.

Sure that Patrick Jory was at the bottom of Black Rock Gorge, the four had been caught completely off guard, and their situation changed in an instant from the height of victory to the depth of stark defeat.

(*To be concluded in the next issue*)

If you like detective stories
Don't Miss
BLACK MASK MAGAZINE

NO. XVIII
ROMANCE RANCH
BY A.F.HOPKINS and R.E.HOVEY
THE STORY SO FAR —
HAVING SURPRISED THE OUTLAW BAND, AND KEPT THEM COVERED TILL HIS UNCLE AND THE CATTLEMEN'S AGENT ARRIVED TO TIE THEM UP, ROY IS NOW FREE TO GIVE THEIR LEADER THE BEATING HE DESERVES —
1
WELL, YOU DOGS, YOUR DAY IS OVER. TIE THEM UP, BOYS —
WHAT A FIGHT! OH MY!
2
HAVE YOU HAD ENOUGH -YOU SWINE ?
UGH- DON'T HIT ME AGAIN ! YOU WIN THIS TIME - BUT DON'T THINK I'M FINISHED!
3
PETE PULLS A KNIFE-
4
ROY KNOCKS HIM OUT.
5
WELL, MOLLY DEAR, THERE'S AN END TO TROUBLE!
OH- ROY - YOUR POOR EYE!
CAN ROMANCE RANCH REALLY LIVE UP TO ITS NAME? ♡
TO BE CONTINUED —

OUT OF THE

Editor's Note:

Tex Sherman, who gives us the latest news of the rodeo world, is a real Westerner. He has punched cows and broken horses throughout the West. He has been rodeo contestant and judge himself, and is personally acquainted with most of the people in the rodeo game.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

"WAGONYARD" Tommy Limker tells me that many of the contestants of the New York and Boston Rodeos are staying in New York City until the opening of the Eastern season. Among the cowboy rodeo stars who are temporarily riding subways instead of broncs are Curley Hatchell, Leonard Murray, Tom Perkins, Bill Keen, Oklahoma Curley, Chick O'Connor, Harry Van Campen, Joe Wolf, Bill Wakefield and "Wagonyard" himself. Well, it's good training if the boys can take it, as anyone knows who's been caught in a Forty-Second Street stampede.

Despite the fact that some of the best cowboys of the arena are holing up in New York, there didn't seem to be any top-hands missing at the Los Angeles Rodeo, which was the feature attraction of the Eleventh Great Western Live-Stock Show. Paul Hill, manager and director of this huge outfit, put on the best rodeo I ever saw on the Coast. Leonard Ward was the arena director and was responsible for that fast snap to the program. Abe Lefton and Homer Holcomb formed an unbeatable announcing team with their rousing good comedy and Abe's eagle eye for celebrities.

Andy Devine, film star, showed up on Abe's announcing stand with Stetson hat and high heeled boots. Abe introduced him as a coming champion cowboy, which the Hollywood crowd thought was a joke, since Andy is a great movie comedian, but which Abe tells me has some truth in it. Andy Devine has been hiding it under his many other talents, but he is really one of the best bronc-riders on the Pacific Coast.

I understand that Abe Lefton will handle the "mike" at some of the coming Eastern shows, which is as it should be, because he is probably the best announcer any arena ever developed.

Many old-timers, including "Uncle Joe" Mooney, Noah Henry, Jack Ireland, Al Allen and Lloyd Saunders, were on hand to see Clay Carr tip over his beef in 6⅗ seconds. Most of the boys caught their steers right over the line, but they were tough beeves and gave the boys so much battle that many of them didn't get into the money.

Dolores Steelman, daughter of Hoosey Steelman, entered the steer-wrestling contest and made a remarkable showing. Dolores was born and raised on a ranch and she works stock with the hands during round-up. Another girl who did a fine job that night was Ann Schrepfer, arena secretary, who had the tough job of keeping all the records accurate. Jess Kell, Western clown, pleased the crowd immensely. He and his clever mule clown most of the Western Coast rodeos.

The new "Cowboy Turtle Association" called a strike at the Los Angeles Rodeo, but it only lasted twenty minutes. The bronc-riders struck for Hamley Committee saddles

for any and all bronc-riding, so Manager Paul Hill promised the boys that only Association saddles would be used in the future.

The final winners of the rodeo are:

Bareback bronc-riding: 1. Smoky Snyder; 2. Frank Schnieder; 3. Jim Hazen and Leonard Ward split money.

Saddle bronc-riding: 1. Frank Schnieder; 2. Turk Greenough; 3. Ray Bartham.

Steer wrestling: 1. Joe Mendes; 2. Canada Kid; 3. Oral Zumwalt.

Calf roping: 1. and 2. Fox O'Callahan and Andy Juaregui split first and second money; 3. Oral Zumwalt and Clay Carr split third money.

This calf-roping record is most unusual because it is seldom that money is split so many different ways in one event. Close competition, boys.

Plans are now being made by J. A. McNaughton, president of the Union Stock Yards, to build a huge solid concrete grandstand and a new arena with permanent chutes for the future Los Angeles rodeos.

Producer Paul Hill put on his own private little event. He offered five hundred dollars to any bronc-rider who could successfully ride that outlaw horse, "Mussolini." Such top-hands as Clay Carr and Turk Greenough took a sitting on this wonder horse only to come down out of the saddle before the ten seconds were up. Paul put a secret little smile on his face and the money back in his pocket. Outlaw "Mussolini" will go down in rodeo fame along with "Steamboat" and "Midnight." He's a bucking terror.

Some of the highlights of this rodeo were Uncle Joe Mooney's wonderful stock-yards cane; Hazel McCart saying it seemed strange to be sitting in the grandstand instead of trick riding out in the arena; Betty and Pat, nieces of the late Charlie Irwin who staged some famous Wyoming rodeos; Vinegar Roan, old-timer (he spent twenty-six years in arenas) not being able to keep away from the chutes; Earl Mueller, cowboy, and now chief of police at San Fernando, getting into the calf-roping money; Cal Godshall, big boss of the Victorville Rodeo, enjoying the events with his wife and daughter. The latter is a trick-riding cowgirl worth watching.

Buddy Sterling, retired rodeo contestant, has invited me to visit the estate of the late Will Rogers, which he now manages. I'll drop by before riding East for the season to let you know how the world's most famous cowboy lived.

Here's an odd little story: Cowboy Lats Cooper had a Frontier exhibit at the Texas Centennial. A newsreel company came by, shooting the unveiling of a statute of Buffalo Bill. Lats somehow got in the picture. Across the country, in California, a woman happened to see this newsreel. She recognized Lats and got in touch with him. It was his sister and they hadn't seen each other for twenty-five years.

As you read this the Rodeo Association of America will be having its annual convention in Reno, Nevada. I am planning to be there in order to give you first-hand information on any rodeo legislation that is passed. Hugh Bennett, secretary of the United Cowboy Turtle Association, will be on hand to represent this new organization. It is my belief that both of these associations will amicably work out some plan beneficial to both the managers of rodeo and the contestants.

Twenty-five years ago Montana Meechy was one of our best all-around cowboys. You can hear him on the radio now.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

Rodeo Fans' Association

Tex Sherman, *Director*

Executive Committee

Fred McCarger, *secretary of the Rodeo Association of America*
Frank Moore, *manager of the Madison Square Garden Rodeo*
Grace Sparks, *secretary of the Prescott Frontier Days*
Harmon W. Peery, *mayor of Ogden, Utah*
Charlie Murphy, *arena director of the Livingston Round-Up*
Roy Ritner, *secretary of the Pendleton Round-Up*
Robert D. Hanesworth, *secretary of the Cheyenne Frontier Days*
L. C. Morrison, *manager of the Black Hills Round-Up*

We have a new member to add to our executive committee, folks. L. C. Morrison, manager of the Black Hills Round-Up at Belle Fourche, South Dakota, has kindly consented to be on the committee. The Black Hills Round-Up, as you fans probably know, takes place every year around the Fourth of July.

Now that we have our Rodeo Fans' Association under way, it's time for us to get together and form some plans that will bring the rodeo game to a high level in the world of sports.

The first job—your first job—is to organize a Chute in your town and get members together. Then put your heads together and write the boss, and give your ideas as to what you think would help the rodeo game. When we publish the letter, we will use your name.

Here is an idea of how to work:

1. Let us know what event in the rodeo game you think needs some changing.
2. Tell us what your favorite event is, and why.
3. Send in the news of your local rodeo.
4. Will you ask your local Chamber of Commerce to see that a local rodeo is staged, that the money is in the bank to protect the contestants and the local merchants?
5. What do you think of the idea of an annual convention of rodeo fans, where we can meet and thrash out rules and regulations that will benefit the rodeo game?

"No, I'm not riding in the rodeo this year. I've got to get these new togs broke in."

RODEO FANS' ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I hereby pledge my support to the cause of clean sportsmanship and the rodeo game.

(Miss)
(Mrs.)
(Mr.)

Name.....

Address.....

.....

I enclose ten cents for the Rodeo Fans' Association pin.

Rodeo Fans' Association, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

3-5-37

Trail's End Roll Call

Here, folks, are some more new members to welcome into your club:

Miss Rachel Deaton, Troy, N. C.
Mr. Paul P. Demery, Pleasant Home, Man., Canada
Miss Grace Dennis, 4431 Gravois Ave., St. Louis, Mo.
Miss Claribel Dickson, c/o W. A. Henderson, R. 3, Ingersoll, Ont., Canada
Miss Dona Diehl, Newberry, Calif.
Mr. John Dorcy, 79 Anoka Ave., Barrington, R. I.
Cpl. Eugene Dow, HQ Btry., 41st C. A., Honolulu, Hawaii
Mrs. N. E. Downs, Felton, Penna.
Mr. Jimmie Dumont, C. N. R. (Extra Gang) Kendal, Sask., Canada
Mr. Harold Eash, Hulsopple, Penna.
Miss Margee R. Ernest, 118 Huron St., Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., Canada
Miss Liba Eshleman, 736 N. Queen St., Lancaster, Penna.
Mr. John Farmer, East Millinocket, P. O. Box 118, Me.
Mr. Lloyd Farris, R. 2, Owensville, Mo.
Mr. Niilo Fastelin, CCC Co. 680, F. 12, Trout Lake, Mich.
Mr. Raymond Floyd, 2202 E. Lafayette St., Stockton, Calif.
Mrs. Ernestine Foulk, Dobbins, Calif.
Miss Mildred Frankenfield, 741 E. Fairview St., Bethlehem, Penna.
Miss Lottie Gerlock, 4616 Wetzel St., Wheeling, W. Va.
Miss Virginia Grindey, 8332 Burley Ave., South Chicago, Ill.
Miss Nellie Ann Hale, R. 1, Box 55, Huntress Ave., Westbrook, Me.
Miss Ruby Hamilton, P. O. Box 328, Magog, Que., Canada
Mr. Samuel Harrison, Rockwood, Mich.
Miss Helen Hoffe, R. 2, Elmwood, Ill.
Miss Iona Karkmeyer, 860 High St., Oroville, Calif.
Miss Marjorie Kearney, R. 3, Elgin, Ont., Canada
Miss Mary Kosmac, 1190 Shakespeare Ave., Bronx, New York City, N. Y.
Mrs. Beatrice Kunkle, Box 257, La Grange, Ohio
Miss Mary Krieger, Box 26, North Vassalboro, Me.
Miss Evelyn Marica, Haddam, Conn.
Miss Martha May Cyrus, 1001 S. 3rd St., Dayton, Wash.
Mr. Abel Medeiros, Box 2, Koloa, Kauai, Hawaii
Mrs. Everta Morrison, Gen Del., Smith River, Calif.
Miss Darlyne Mueller, Pleasant Dale, Nebr.
Miss Martha M. Musko, Mt. Cobb Rd., Lake Ariel, Penna.
Mr. J. Nicholls, "A" Co., 60th Rifles, Mingaladon, Rangoon, Burma, India
Miss Pauline Olsanoski, Box 241, Newmarket, N. H.
Miss Alice Osenbaugh, R. 1, Box 55, Sterling, Kans.
Miss Virginia Puglia, 523 Fifth Ave., Brownsville, Penna.
Mr. Roy Ratke, Biggar, Sask., Canada
Mr. Cecil Reynolds, R. 2, Waterloo, N. Y.
Mr. E. Edward Risdon, Strathmore, Alta., Canada
Miss Esther Robart, R. 8, Box 806, Phoenix, Ariz.
Mr. Dee Rogers, c/o Emil Rippe, Route A, Aurora, Colo.
Mr. Stanley Rogness, Kingman, Alta., Canada
Mr. I. B. Sheilds, 3501 Mont. Ave., Billings, Mont.
Miss Edith Slater, 119 Croton Ave., Ossining, N. Y.
Miss Louise Stacy, R. 1, Box 219-A, Gaffney, S. C.
Miss Verna Stalnaker, Box 453, Orofino, Idaho
Mr. John Stark, 354—16th Ave., Irvington, N. J.
Mr. Arthur Steffens, Hydro, Okla.
Miss Mary Stewart, 427—5th St., Saskatoon, Sask., Canada
Mr. Werner Stoffers, 4721—45th St., Woodside, Long Island, N. Y.
Mr. Arthur Strand, Box 35, Puposky, Minn.
Miss Ida Striedel, R. 1, Box 81, Westhoff, Texas
Miss Tony Striedel, R. 1, Box 81, Westhoff, Texas
Miss June Sutton, 633 S. 6th St., Klamath Falls, Ore.
Miss Idamae Tabbert, 4926 N. Springfield Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Miss Norine Taylor, R. 1, Box 221 A, Sumner, Wash.
Mrs. Gale Tenney, Keith, W. Va.
Miss Geneva Thomas, 19 W. Burnside Ave., Eastport, Md.
Mr. Henry Thompson, Roxborough Apts., Ottawa, Ont., Canada
Mrs. Ruth Thompson, Box 345, Fort Bliss, Texas
Mr. Harve Thornsberry, Asco, W. Va.
Mr. Thirstol Thornton, Winfield, Ala.
Mr. Hovey Todd, C. C. C. Co. 5479, Speedwell, Va.
Mr. N. F. Trotter, Gen. Del., Kingman, Ariz.
Miss Dorothy Ward, Box 43, R. 1, Alamota, Kans.
Miss Kitty Wayland, Amissville, Va.
Miss Martha Weightman, 714 S. 26th St., Colorado Springs, Colo.
Mr. A. B. Wessels, Private Hotel, Vryburg, South Africa
Miss Myrtle Wilson, 403-B Longfellow, Vandergrift, Penna.

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.
I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(*Miss*)
(*Mrs.*)
(*Mr.*)

Address.....

City.....

State.....

This coupon makes you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.
Please *print* your name and address plainly.

206

"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES in all parts of the world. Its purpose is to help readers make friends with people everywhere, near and far, at home and abroad.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter you find printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those people who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing practical jokes, and particularly ask you not to sign your letters with other people's names.

He Teaches School Out West

Dear Editor:

Five years ago while reading your delightful magazine from cover to cover (as I've done ever since), I decided to write to one of those persons seeking pen pals. But, alas, she up and got married and now won't write any more. So will you kindly print this plea for pen pals—the more the merrier. I am teaching school in a lonely mining camp in the cold, forbidding Nevada hills. The cold, snowy winter months threaten to be weary even though the Double R brightens a little time for me. Incidentally, I'm twenty-four years old.

Sincerely,
MR. ODEN ROMWALL.

Sulphur, Nev.

English Stenographer

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for many years and would like to tell you how much I have enjoyed the magazine.

Would anyone care to correspond with a tall, slim, blue-eyed stenographer from England? I will answer anything, even things I know nothing about! All letters will be answered because the many girls with whom I work would also like pen pals but are too shy to write.

Sincerely,
MISS E. M. TIMMS.

5 Geneva Rd., Wallasey,
Cheshire, England

Works in a Gold Mine

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt, but does that spoil my chances? I am a youth, very close to nineteen years of age, and I have dark hair and blue-gray eyes and stand five feet eleven inches in my stocking feet (if you don't mind). I have traveled in many States and countries, but at present I am working in a gold mine here. Girls and boys, I don't care where you live or what you do, please drop me a line. Anyone caring to discuss and add to our mutual knowledge anything pertaining to chemistry, geology, biology, and allied sciences, please write, too.

Sincerely,
FRANCIS JENSEN.

Black Hawk, Colo.

Nebraskan Farmerette

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely farm girl, thirteen years of age, and I would like to have some pen pals. My favorite sports are playing ball and playing the piano. I would like to hear from people between my age and eighteen.

Sincerely,
CAROL PETERSON.

R. 3, Box 83,
Big Springs, Nebr.

Blond Hair—Blue Eyes

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to crash "Our Air Mail," but I hope you won't disappoint me. I would like pen pals from all over the U. S. A. and foreign lands. I am a twenty-one-year-old crippled girl with blond hair and blue eyes. I promise to answer all letters. I'll be waiting.

Sincerely,
ALICE DAVIN.

1919 Ellis St.,
San Francisco, Calif.

Mr. Gray from Mississippi

Dear Editor:

I am very fond of RANCH ROMANCES and would like to hear from its other readers all over the world. I am seventeen years old and have gray eyes and black hair.

Respectfully,
MR. LAMAR GRAY.

Co. 5467-SP-1,
Hollandale, Miss.

Tales of the Border

Dear Editor:

I am a tall, blond girl with blue eyes and I can tell some of your other readers about the interesting things that happen here on the Border. I will gladly exchange snaps and souvenirs.

Sincerely,
MISS CAPTOLA HOBBS.

Box 234,
Eagle Pass, Tex.

How Cold Is It?

Dear Editor:

I am a Northerner way up here in the northern part of Maine. I would like to write to people between the ages of twelve and twenty-five. I will exchange snaps and tell you about how cold it is up here. I am fifteen years old. Pick up your pens.

Sincerely,
FREDERICK DOESCHER.

Box 615,
Houlton, Me.

California Rancher

Dear Editor:

I live on a ranch in northern California. I am five feet four inches tall and have hazel eyes and brown hair. I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for the last two years and like it very much. I would particularly like to hear from readers in South America and foreign countries but all are welcome. I will trade stamps with anyone caring to do so.

Sincerely,
AL. A. MacDONALD.

North San Juan, Calif.

"Auburn Hair but No Freckles"

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for the past year and enjoy the stories very much. I especially like "GIRL OF COURAGE." I am eighteen years old and have auburn hair but no freckles. I am especially interested in anyone in the Navy or Marines, but I'll answer all letters. Please print this, but if you don't I'll just keep on writing.

Sincerely,
EDITH HERDER.

330 Hollister St.,
Stratford, Conn.

Lonely Oklahoma Miss

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for some time and enjoy the stories very much. I would like to correspond with some of your other readers. I am seventeen years old and have dark blue eyes and curly brown hair. I am five feet three inches tall. Will someone please write to a lonely girl?

Sincerely,
MARZELL WALKER.

301 E. 9th St.,
Wewoka, Okla.

Three Sailors and a Record

Dear Editor:

We are three sailors in China, far from our native land. Lawrence is twenty-four years old, William is twenty-three and Wilson is twenty-one. We are all from Southern states. RANCH ROMANCES is our favorite magazine and we can scarcely wait for the next issue which takes a month to reach China. We can tell you tales of China, the Philippine Islands, Honolulu, Panama, Cuba, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, England and Alaska. We claim the record for reading RANCH ROMANCES in the most foreign countries.

Sincerely,
LAWRENCE ANDERSON,
WILLIAM STOKES,
WILSON SCOTT.

U. S. Asiatic Fleet,
Submarine Squadron 5,
U. S. S. Canopus,
Tsingtao, China
(via San Francisco, Calif.)

The Start of an Argument

Dear Editor:

I am nineteen years old, five feet eleven inches in height and would like very much to correspond with somebody in the United States, preferably in the Southern States like Texas and California. I have been told that the American girls are generally prettier, better dressed and better mannered and more modern than girls of other countries. I'd like to find out for myself.

Sincerely,
RONALD LULTON.

Dovercourt,
1, Church Vale,
East Finchley,
London, N. 2,
England

Her Fourth Attempt

Dear Editor:

This is my fourth attempt. I promise to answer all letters. I am twenty-one years old and have brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are going to the movies and reading good books.

Sincerely,
LILLIAN BERAN.

1337 W. Cullerton St.,
Chicago, Ill.

Cowboys and Indians

Dear Editor:

I am a sixteen-year-old stamp collector from the West. I will tell pen pals about this part of the real West where there are plenty of Indians and plenty of real cowboys. I would like to correspond with people all over the world.

Sincerely,
RAYMOND BELL.

Espanola, N. M.

Here's a New Hobby

Dear Editor:

I am from the Northwest and I have quite a few souvenirs such as trinkets made from deer horns and bear claws. I have shot several deer and bears in the last few years, and as a hobby I have made simple trinkets from the horns, teeth, hoofs and claws. To the first ten people who answer this plea I will send such a souvenir of the great Northwest. I am six feet tall and have brown hair and blue eyes. I am an expert rifle and pistol shot.

Sincerely,
CECIL SLAGLE.

3rd Sig. Co.,
Fort Lewis, Wash.

Will Exchange News Items

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt to get some pen pals, I have been a regular reader of the Double R for quite a long time. I would particularly like to hear from people in the West, but I will exchange news items and snaps with anyone anywhere. I am twenty-seven years old and interested in all kinds of sports and music.

Sincerely,
ERNEST COLES.

25 Oswald St., Carr Lane,
Windhill, Shipley,
Yorks., England

Virginia Coal Miner

Dear Editor:

I am twenty-three years old and a coal miner. I have blond hair, blue eyes and stand five feet ten and one-half inches tall. This is my first attempt for pen pals although I have read RANCH ROMANCES for some time.

Sincerely,
BUNDY BELCHER.

Jewell Ridge, Va.

Young High School Girl

Dear Editor:

I am a young girl going to high school and would like boys and girls everywhere to write to me. I am five feet four inches tall and have blond hair and blue eyes. I will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
RUBY JOHNSON.

Eatonville, Wash.

Thank You, Benjamin

Dear Editor:

I am nineteen years old, five feet eleven inches tall and have black hair and brown eyes. I am handicapped, having only one hand, and would be especially interested in hearing from other readers who are handicapped. My hobby is collecting pins, match boxes, etc., and my main sports are hunting, fishing and swimming. At present I am working at a bowling alley, setting up pins there. I don't presume this will be published because it is my first attempt, but I will try again. There has never been a better magazine of its kind printed than R.R., and believe me, that's my honest opinion.

Sincerely,
BENJAMIN MORRISON.

St. Charles, Ill.

Girl from Palmetto State

Dear Editor:

Make way for a lonely girl who hails from the Palmetto State. I am seventeen years old, five feet four inches tall and have blue-gray eyes and brown hair. I graduated from high school this past June. I would especially like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls, but everyone is welcome.

Sincerely,
THELMA HALL.

122 Pine St.,
Chester, S. C.

"Good Loyal Pen Friends"

Dear Editor:

I am looking for some good loyal pen friends and hope to find them through RANCH ROMANCES. I am a nineteen-year-old blonde, five feet five inches tall. I will exchange snaps. I am fond of all outdoor sports.

Sincerely,
LaVELLE LIVINGSTON.

105 W. Locust St.,
Blooomfield, Iowa

He's a Lonely Bell-Hop

Dear Editor:

I wonder if a lonely bell-hop could break into print? It seems funny for a bell-hop to be lonely in this college town, but those who are not in school haven't much of a chance to get acquainted here. I have brown hair and brown eyes and the usual appearance, being neither a Ben Turpin nor a Clark Gable. I am a stranger in these parts and would sincerely appreciate some pen pals.

Sincerely,
B. (CURLY) LANDRE.

614 Grand St.,
Pullman, Wash.

"Little Switzerland"

Dear Editor:

I am a young man in my early twenties and have dark hair and brown eyes. I hail from the great State of States, that "Little Switzerland of America," West Virginia. Time hangs heavily on my hands and I have ample time to answer all your letters. I'll swap snaps, too.

Sincerely,
VICTOR HALBRITTER.

Tunnelton, W. Va.

"Each Issue More Thrilling"

Dear Editor:

I am nearly eighteen years old and would like to have some pen pals. I find each new issue of RANCH ROMANCES more thrilling than the last. I am five feet six inches tall and have black curly hair and brown eyes. I enjoy dancing more than any other thing.

Sincerely,
PATRICIA BAPTISTA.

R. 2, Box 947,
Turlock, Calif.

She Likes to Write

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of fourteen with blue eyes and light hair. I am fond of all sports, but my favorite pastime is letter writing. Please pick up your pens and write to me.

Sincerely,
DORIS SAGE.

Box 193,
Cusick, Wash.

Scotchman in India

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt to crash those gates, and I have answered many letters in "Our Air Mail." I have served four years in His Majesty's Forces and I am in India now. I get lonesome on this side of the world and would sincerely appreciate hearing from anyone. I am interested in swimming, music, reading and exchanging photos. Drop a line to a Scotch friend.

Sincerely,
PRIVATE C. B. FRASER.

HQ. Wing, Signal Section,
2nd Bn., The Highland Light Inf.,
Robert's Barracks,
Peshawar, N. W. F. P.,
India

Eleven-Year-Old Iowan

Dear Editor:

I am a girl eleven years old with dark hair and dark eyes. I am lonesome and I wish you would help me lasso some pen pals. My hobbies are horseback riding, reading and writing.

Sincerely,
BEVERLY BOAS.

New Hampton, Iowa

"Brownette Hair"

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to crash "Our Air Mail," so please skip that basket this time. I am five feet two inches tall and have blue eyes, light brownette hair and I'm nineteen years old. My hobbies are reading, writing and baseball. Come on, all you cowboys, aviators, cowgirls and anyone who wishes to write to a Kansas girl who will be pleased to hear from you.

Yours truly,
ALICE OSENBAUGH.

R. 1, Box 55,
Sterling, Kans.

Many Friends Through R.R.

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for almost two years and I think it is the best Western to be found. I am a girl from the Prairie State. I am fourteen years old, and have brown hair and brown eyes.

My hobbies are reading and collecting movie stars' pictures. My favorite sports are horseback riding and playing ball. I have found many friends through RANCH ROMANCES and am trying to find more.

Sincerely,
BETTY STONE.

Paxton, Ill.

Young C.C.C. Athlete

Dear Editor:

I am nineteen years of age and I am in a C.C.C. camp where it is very lonely at times. We are way up here in the hills and woods of Vermont. I am interested in football, basketball and track. I earned my letters in these three sports at school. I am five feet eight inches tall and have brown wavy hair. To the first ten girls who write I will send snaps if they send theirs.

Sincerely,
GEORGE WILLIAMS.

C.C.C. Co. 1169,
Cuttingsville, Vt.

Wyoming Represented

Dear Editor:

Every Army post in America and the Islands seem to be represented in your famous "Our Air Mail," so why not Fort Francis E. Warren of Wyoming? The whole battery is offering suggestions as to what should be said in this letter. Rest assured that all letters will be answered and we shall be glad to hear from you.

Sincerely,
JACK HAYDEN.

HQ. Btry., 76th F.A.,
Fort F. E. Warren, Wyo.

Do You Like Bracelets?

Do you want one of the lovely Trail's End bracelets pictured below? On each of these beautiful pieces of jewelry is the insignia of the Trail's End Club, and the bracelet costs only twenty-five cents.

If you desire one, send this coupon, together with twenty-five cents, to the Trail's End Editor, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York.

I am a member of the Trail's End Club.

I am enclosing twenty-five cents ($.25), for which please send me one Trail's End bracelet.

Name .....

Street or Route Address.....

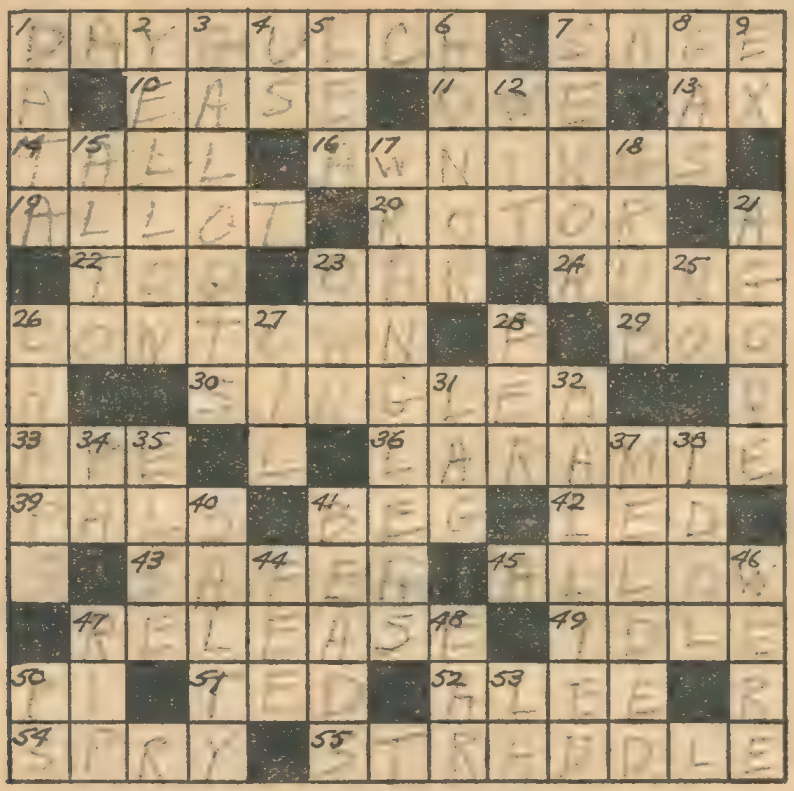
City and State.....

Please print your name and address plainly.

Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

3-5-37

. . The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle . .



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

Across

1. To ambush
7. A Western shrub
10. Comfort
11. To be in debt
13. A woodman's tool
14. Of great height
16. Canvas shades
19. To apportion
20. Something that rotates
22. Also; besides
23. A rowing implement
24. A ladder's cross-strip
26. A cow country town
29. A cry of contempt
30. Selected from a number
33. To mimic
36. A city in Wyoming
39. Buddies
41. To ask alms
42. Guided
43. In less danger
45. To permit
47. To liberate
49. Not employed
50. Jumbled type
51. To turn for drying
52. Toward the lee
54. Agile
55. To sit astride

Down

1. A group of facts
2. Cowardly
3. Simpletons
4. A pronoun
5. A meadow
6. Integrity
7. A title of respect (Mex.)
8. Short for gasoline
9. A prefix denoting out of
12. Humor
15. Music between tenor and treble
17. Ones working with horses
18. Food
21. Gone by
23. To possess
25. Not any
26. Leg coverings
27. To lubricate
28. Through, by, or for
31. To loiter
32. To loop a rope
34. Father
35. Otherwise
37. Declared a score in pinochle
38. A false deity
40. Lively
41. Glass ornaments
44. A fixed charge
46. A part of the verb to be
47. To tear lengthwise
48. An auditory organ
50. Postscript (Abbr.)
53. A note of the scale

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

The Pisces Girl

THE GIRL who comes into this world between the 19th of February and the 21st of March is governed by the sign Pisces, or the Fish; but don't suppose that this means "poor fish." For the Pisces girl is very richly endowed with good qualities, even though her deep emotional nature may make her appear to be helpless and dependent. She is artistic, orderly, self-sacrificing, generous to a fault, a lover of beauty and harmony in all things. She has a delightful sense of humor and a vivid imagination. Her standards are high and she is thoroughly honest and conscientious in her work and in her relations to both people and things.

This honesty and conscientiousness of hers make her invaluable in any occupation requiring minute attention to detail, for whatever she does must be exactly right before she will be content to leave it. But the occupation, whatever it may be, should be one which she likes. If compelled to do work that is distasteful to her, she will do it well, but it will make her unhappy and tend to plunge her into a depressed frame of mind, which is the worst possible thing for a Pisces person.

Even tempered, cheerful, charming and agreeable, she also has a quick, fiery temper, but a sensible word in time from a friend will almost always melt her anger. She is affectionate and loyal and counts on the same affection and loyalty from others. Should she be disappointed in one in whom she has confidence, she is wounded to the quick.

She is inclined to be too sensitive, perhaps too much affected by outer influences. Nerve-strain and anxiety are particularly bad for her, often undermining what should be a sound and healthy constitution. Yet it is this very sensitiveness, this quick, keen appreciation and responsiveness which form a great part of her charm.

She will find her most congenial friends and associates in those people born under the signs of Aries, Cancer or Scorpio. Virgo people stimulate her intellectual tastes, bring out the very best that is in her. In any one of these four signs, she should find a mate who will make her happy; and fortunate is the man who wins for his wife a girl with her natural talents and endowments. She can make a shack on the edge of the barren wastelands into a real home. Her presence creates harmony and peace. She wants to give, rather than to take, and in giving, she intuitively smooths out the rough places for herself and for others.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends him this coupon in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Avenue, New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date..... 3-5-37

In the next issue Professor Mari will analyze the men born between February 19th and March 21st.

A very remarkable picture

To photograph a live wild eagle is an achievement to be proud of. The photographer is justifiably proud of this striking picture, and has had a beautiful 8" x 10" enlargement made of it of which she is also proud. It cost her 25¢.

An 8" x 10" enlargement of your favorite photograph, 25c

and two coupons from Ranch Romances!

Somewhere you have a small photograph of someone dear to you that you think the world of, or a picture, like this eagle, that is very unusual and hard to make.

Take this opportunity to get a fine enlargement of it for a fraction of what it would cost you at a photographer's store. You'll be amazed to see how much clearer and better in every way the enlargement is. Fill in the coupon below with your name and address, and put it away carefully. When you get the next issue of Ranch Romances two weeks from now, cut out the coupon from that issue, attach the two coupons to your photograph (send the negative if you have it), and mail to us with 25 cents in U. S. stamps or coin.

An enlargement measuring eight by ten inches will go to you in a few days, and your photograph will be returned at the same time. We'll return your money if a good clear enlargement cannot be made from your photograph.

You can have as many enlargements of one picture as you want, or enlargements of as many pictures as you want, at 25 cents each; **but you must send us two of these coupons for each enlargement ordered.**

If you would like your enlargements tinted, enclose 50 cents instead of 25 cents and a beautifully colored enlargement will be sent you.

Tell your friends about this opportunity. They may be greatly pleased to know about it.

RANCH ROMANCES, 36
Dept. D, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.

I enclose.....¢ and two coupons. Send me one 8 by 10 inch { plain / colored } enlargement of the attached photograph, returning the photograph at the same time.

Please Print

Name.....

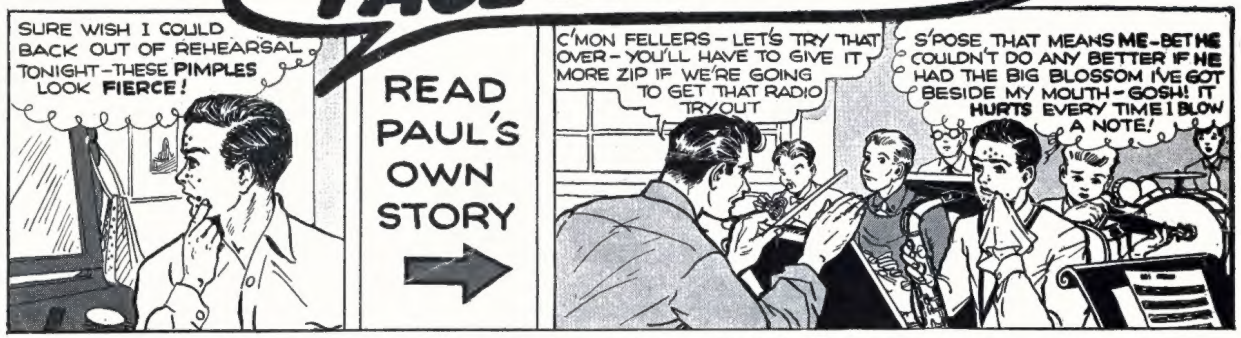
Street and No.....

City..... State.....

The TRUE EXPERIENCE of PAUL SHEA

OF SPRINGFIELD, N.J.

I HATE TAKING THIS FACE ANYWHERE!


SURE WISH I COULD BACK OUT OF REHEARSAL TONIGHT—THESE PIMPLES LOOK FIERCE!
READ PAUL'S OWN STORY
C'MON FELLERS—LET'S TRY THAT OVER—YOU'LL HAVE TO GIVE IT MORE ZIP IF WE'RE GOING TO GET THAT RADIO TRYOUT
S'POSE THAT MEANS ME—BET HE COULDN'T DO ANY BETTER IF HE HAD THE BIG BLOSSOM I'VE GOT BESIDE MY MOUTH—GOSH! IT HURTS EVERY TIME I BLOW A NOTE!

FOR GOODNESS SAKE PAUL—WHAT'S GOT INTO YOU LATELY—I NEVER KNEW YOU TO SIT AROUND HOME THIS WAY—DON'T YOU FEEL WELL?
OH—I'M ALL RIGHT MUM—ONLY, WELL—A GUY DOESN'T MUCH LIKE GOING AROUND WITH A PIMPLY FACE LIKE THIS!

I WONDER IF FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST WOULDN'T HELP YOU? I'M GOING TO GET YOU SOME—IT'S WHAT A SKIN DOCTOR TOLD LAURA TO EAT—AND SHE SAID IT WAS WONDERFUL
IT SURE IS WONDERFUL IF IT REALLY WORKS

LATER
ALL READY, SON? DAD SAYS HE'LL DRIVE US OVER TO THAT RADIO AUDITION.
O.K.—SAY, MUM—THOSE YEAST CAKES ARE THE STUFF. ALL RIGHT—LOOK—THERE'S NOT A HICKIE LEFT—

PAUL, YOU WERE SWELL—I NEVER HEARD YOU PLAY BETTER
THANKS—I TRIED MY DARNDEST—GEE—I SURE HOPE WE SOUNDED ALL RIGHT IN THAT MIKE
STUDIO

"THE WAY I LOOKED BEFORE I took Fleischmann's Yeast. I hated going anywhere, my face was so broken out."

PAUL NOW—PIMPLES GONE "Fleischmann's Yeast sure cleared up my skin fine," he says.

a fellow feels pretty low about having to go around when his face is all broken out with mean looking pimples I got so I hated to be seen. I hate why I'm mighty glad to tell others about what a swell pimple chaser Fleischmann's Yeast is. Every boy that wants to get rid of pimples ought to eat it.

Paul Shea

Clears up Adolescent Pimples

AFTER the start of adolescence, from about 13 to 25, important glands develop. This disturbs the body. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin and pimples appear.

Fleischmann's Yeast helps clear up pimples by clearing these skin irritants out of the blood. Then—pimples go!

Eat 3 cakes a day—a cake about ½ hour before each meal—plain, or in a little water.

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Your Choice of These Amazing Jewelry Values!

Genuine Blue-White Diamonds—Fine Watches Yours For Only a Few Cents a Day!

JUST send your name and address with only $1.00 deposit—stating age, occupation and if possible 1 to 2 credit references. All dealings strictly confidential. **No direct inquiries — no red tape — no interest or extras — no C.O.D. to pay on arrival.**

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If you can surpass our values anywhere, just return your selection and we will promptly refund your full deposit. If fully satisfied after **10 Day Trial Period** pay only the small amount stated each month.

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Only $24.50

3 Genuine DIAMONDS
$2.35 a Month

LJ-1 . . . Exquisite engagement ring of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Fiery, genuine blue-white center diamond; matched diamond on each side. (Specify color gold desired.) **Only $2.35 a month.**

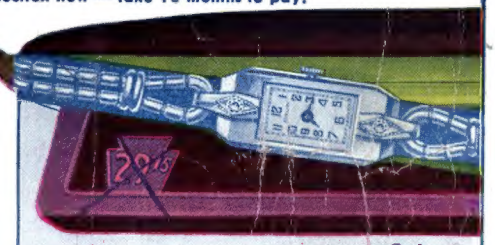
Both for $29.75

Only $2.87 a month

4 Genuine Diamonds

LJ-6 . . . Perfectly matched "Queen of Hearts" engagement and wedding ring ensemble of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Engagement ring is set with a fiery, genuine blue-white diamond, and the wedding ring with 3 matched diamonds. Specify gold desired. **Both for only $2.87 a month.**

If purchased separately:
LJ-6A . . . Engagement Ring only . . . $19.75
LJ-6B . . . Wedding Ring only $12.50
$1.00 Down — Balance 10% Monthly



2 Diamond Baguette
Only $1.87 a month

Only $19.75

LJ-9 . . . One of America's smartest Baguette wrist watches at an especially low price. Elegantly styled, modern lifetime case set with 2 genuine diamonds; fully guaranteed movement. Smart link bracelet to match. **Reduced to $19.75 — only $1.87 a month.**

$29.75

Latest 17 Jewel BULOVA
Only $2.87 a month

LJ-3 . . . BULOVA'S "Goddess of Time"! Guaranteed 17 Jewel BULOVA movement. Tiny, square case in charm and color of natural gold. Silk cord bracelet. **Only $2.87 a month.**

Only $27.50

Ladies' 7 Diamond CLUSTER RING
Only $2.65 a month

LJ-2 . . . Dazzling ladies' square prong cluster ring, expertly set with seven finely matched fiery, genuine diamonds. Looks like a $450.00 solitaire. 14K Solid Yellow Gold ring. **Only $2.65 a month.**

$14.50

A ROYAL SENSATION!
Only $1.35 a month

LJ-4 . . . Ladies, baguette type wrist watch in streamlined permanent white case; fully guaranteed movement. Matched bracelet. **Only $1.35 a month.**

BENRUS
"The Watch that times the Airways!"

SHOCK-PROOF
JAR-PROOF

Only $15.95

$1.49 a month

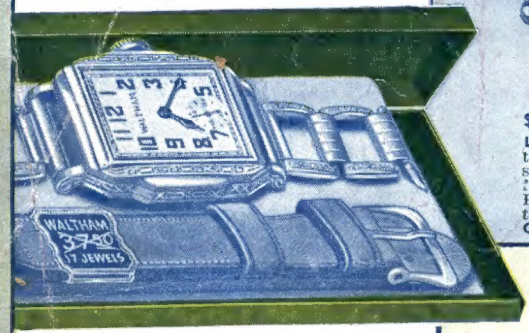
LJ-12 . . . Nationally known BENRUS at the price of an ordinary watch! Handsomely engraved white case fitted with a fully guaranteed SHOCKPROOF, JAR-PROOF, BENRUS movement. New type triple link bracelet to match. **$15.95 — Only $1.49 a month.**

$1.59 a month

Only $16.95

Diamond, Initial Ring

LJ-7 . . . Gentleman's initial ring, very attractively priced. 10K Solid Yellow Gold, set with a brilliant, genuine diamond and 2 Solid White Gold Initials on contrasting, genuine black Onyx. (Specify initials desired.) **Only $1.59 a month.**



17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat"
Extra Leather Strap FREE!
$2.37 a month

Only $24.75

LJ-8 . . . Imagine this for only $2.37 a month! Factory guaranteed famous 17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat" at a remarkably low price. Richly engraved, permanent white case with link bracelet to match and a smart, new leather strap included FREE. Usually $37.50 — now offered complete as shown at the sensationally low price of only **$24.75 — $2.37 a month.**

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